Ritual Bluff

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Ritual Bluff

by doylestanov

Summary

I (21M) hooked up with my ex-girlfriend's (20F) new boyfriend (22M)

A few weeks ago, my gf dumped me. It was harsh but I pretended to be okay with it. Then I found out she'd been cheating on me for the entire last month of our relationship. I was going through a rough patch at the time and learning she'd been playing me really stung. Then my ex hosted a New Years party. I got wasted and went there looking for trouble. Just to spite her, I started making out with her new boyfriend, but things got way out of control and we wound up hooking up.

I'm not into guys, but I kind of liked it?

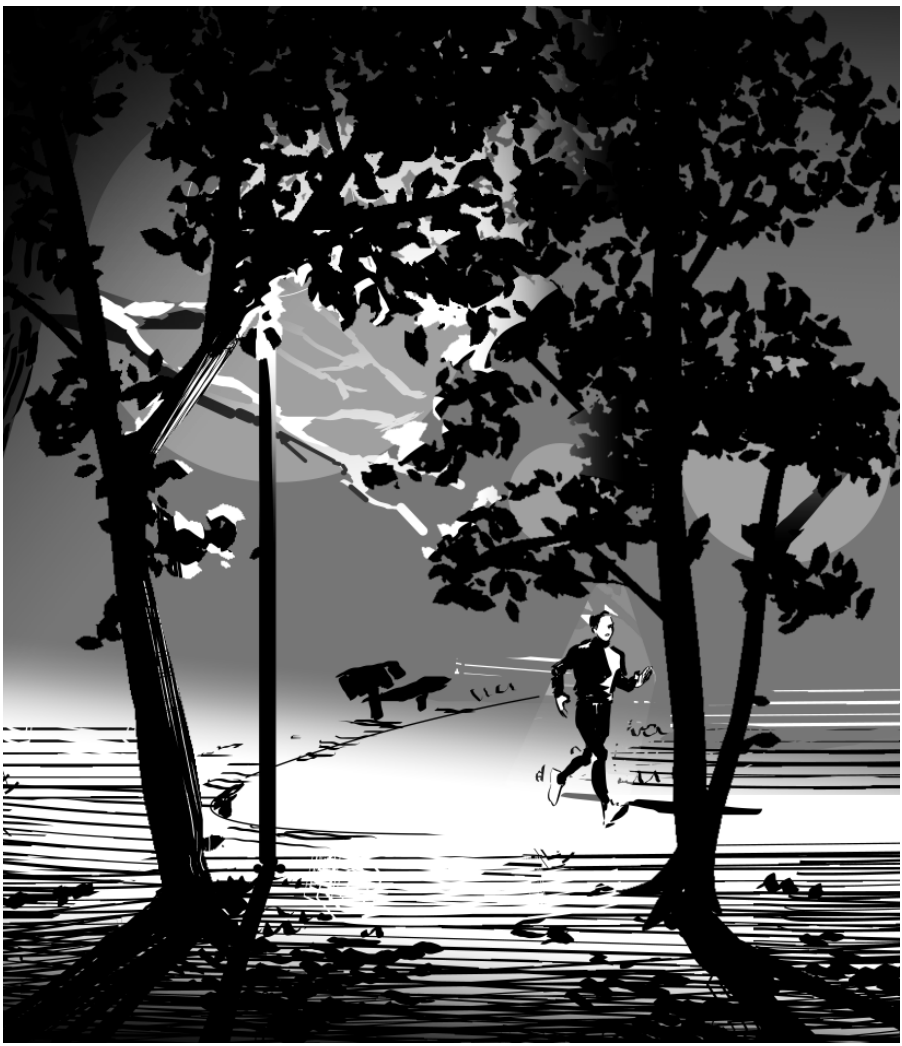
What do I do?

Chapter 1: Help, I Hooked Up With My Ex-Girlfriend's New Boyfriend

Chapter Notes

Written by Jack Stanford, Illustrations by J.R. Doyle

See the end of the chapter for more notes



Jackson is tired, but he’s not tired enough.

It’s late, and he’s been up since before dawn cramming for a test. He had an afternoon shift right after, too, then class again. He could have

gone straight home after the evening class, but then he'd have to listen to the five voicemails his mother's left him. Worn out as his body is, his brain is still buzzing. This is the only time he has to himself, to clear his head.

He likes his workout music too loud and uptempo. He likes to strain to keep up. He can't hear his own footsteps, only feels them jar him rhythmically.

Jackson has been running for years. Running is what got him here, to this bougie campus with its manicured lawns and its faux-Greek columns. It's one of the few things he can claim he's good at, an expert even. When his next step falls it feels no different than the million before it—but just this once, instead of pushing off against the ground, his foot rolls.

Jackson's guts jolt, he pitches forward, and he completely eats it on the sidewalk. His phone goes flying, ripping the headphones out of his ears and leaving him in shocked silence.

He pushes himself up slowly—his palm is scraped raw, he only notices when it stings—and lurches to pick up his phone. The screen is cracked beyond repair. He can see its insides. It won't turn on.

Jackson clenches his jaw and tucks the ruined machine into his pocket. Well, that's his semester's budget fucked. He wants to scream in frustration, but there are still a couple people out and they're glancing over in concern, so he swallows the urge to make a scene.

Now his whole body is flooded with the kind of nervous energy he'd been out here to expel in the first place. He waves a hand at the strangers, but they've already turned away.

There's a sickly ache in his leg but he can still work with it. Without music to distract him, Jackson pushes himself to the gasping limit, until he's drowning out the silence with his own heartbeat.

"What do you mean we're not doing it at my place?"

"What do you mean what do I mean?" says Shannon. She looks cute and put-together even on an early morning FaceTime. Hair neatly braided, fluffy bathrobe wrapped securely around her. Even her baffled frown is cute, dimpling between her brows. "Why on earth would we do it over there?"

“Well… because it’s my birthday party?”

Shannon looks pained. “Jackson, no offense,” she says, “but my place can hold a lot more people, and it doesn’t have upstairs neighbors that call the cops over loud music.”

“Those girls moved out last semester,” he protests.

She looks exasperated. “I thought you’d be happy! It’s less work for you this way.”

“Yeah, but.” He sighs, scrubbing at his bedhead which even in thumbnail form he can see is horrendous.

“The invite is already up, babe,” Shannon says gently. “Can we not fight about this.”

He’s already given up. “Sure.”

“Thanks,” she says, beaming for him. “It’s gonna be so fun, you’ll see! I gotta start picking my outfit now so I can be ready by like, night.”

He laughs and waits for her to hang up first. The home screen that replaces her face is still the factory default. Shannon fronted him the money for the new phone, which was humiliating but which she insisted wasn’t a big deal. She probably doesn’t even expect him to pay her back.

He’d been in the middle of cleaning up his apartment when she called. The bedrooms are small, but the common space is a decent size, and it has a good couch, and a counter that can handle a lot of drinking. He’d kind of been looking forward to having company over.

Before he can put his phone away it chirps and shows a text from his roommate, Kris.

Kris
9:59 AM
K
still cleaning house?
change of plans. apparently Shannon wants to host.
K
o shit. I hope you finished the dishes before she told you that.
fuck u
yes I did
thanks
K
I'm off work by 9, should i meet you over there whenever traffic lets up?
10:02 AM

yeah, catch me talking stocks like i'm fixing to inherit the whole financial sector
K
lol good luck with the trust fund kids
thx
good luck with the tech bros
10:13 AM

He goes to class, then track practice, where his foot is stiff and uncooperative. He showers, jokes around with the guys on the team, changes into a black t-shirt, which is College Formal as far as he's concerned, works on his homework on the shuttle.

Shannon's place is on Frat Row with the other expensive apartments. It's like half an hour on the bus, which he kills with music, bouncing his leg, and scrolling through every feed available.

He may actually be fashionably late, Jackson realizes when he goes inside. The music is too loud, which he appreciates, and there are already fifteen people shouting over it, scattered across the open plan floor. Shannon's right; it *is* pretty luxurious, and he *should* be glad he didn't have to do any of this.

"Chen! Happy Birthday!" Jackson turns his head. Amal, Tyler, and The Other Asian Jackson from track are there, waving at him, and his old roommate Caleb, plus a few randos Jackson could swear he's never spoken to. Amal's chill but the others are like legacy scholarship types, like took the SAT five times types, like learned an extra language at home with a tutor or nanny types. He waves back.

He finds Shannon in the kitchen, putting out more snacks. Her outfit really is killer, showing off her sharp shoulders and long legs.

“Hey,” he says. “You look amazing.”

“Babe! Happy *birthday* !” She gives him a fierce hug, but when he goes in for a kiss she pulls away. “No way, this face took hours to put together.”

“Well, it’s working,” he says, as lecherously as possible.

She smacks his shoulder, then lowers her voice. “Later, okay?” she says, looking up through her mascara. “Meanwhile…” she reaches around his waist for a platter. “Relax! Have fun!” This is, he knows by now, her gentle reminder not to lurk in the corner at his own party.

He wanders over to the drinks table and scopes out all the bottles while a tall, clean-cut dude he kind of recognizes from class is fussing with them.

“Hi,” says the guy when he notices. “Can I get you some?” He speaks with that nowhere and everywhere accent Jackson’s started to recognize as the international private school one.

He accepts a Solo cup of tequila which he suspects is wasted on a Solo cup, and on binge drinkers in general. But today he’s actually legal to drink, so fuck it.

Shannon bounds up and links her arm with Jackson’s. “Oh good! You guys have met.” She’s using that fake-bright voice she has when she’s being extra intense. It’s a little early in the night for her hostess duties to be getting to her, but then again, she’s really pulled out all the stops.

“Jackson, this is Jeremy Huang… Jeremy: Jackson Chen, the birthday boy.”

Jeremy looks surprised for a second—hadn't realized he was speaking to the man of the hour, Jackson supposes. He recovers quickly and gives him a warm, firm handshake. “Happy birthday, man. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Who says that? What do you say to that? “It’s all lies,” he jokes, turnabout being fair play. Jeremy’s smile is kind of uncomfortable, so mission accomplished.

There’s a small commotion when more guests arrive. Some of the girls from track, loud and thoroughly pre-wasted. Jackson excuses himself quickly and goes to say hi. When he’s getting smothered in sloppy

hugs he glances back at the drinks table, where Shannon and Jeremy are both watching him. Shannon seems annoyed with the girls, which is fair enough, but he doesn't know what Jeremy's problem is. Did he not curtsy or something when he left the conversation? Well fuck you too, asshole.

After making the rounds Jackson roosts in his favorite armchair, taking in the music, watching everyone's shenanigans, laughing, and doing every shot he's offered. By the time he's three deep and pleasantly buzzed, Jackson's right hand is sticky from the lime and salt, and he has to piss urgently. He heaves himself up out of the armchair, forgets to mind his injured ankle, and folds like a card table.

"Whoa, careful—"

Out of nowhere, someone catches him around the waist and under one armpit. It's Jeremy Hwang. He's strong, even though he's not an athlete as far as Jackson knows. It's probably just gym muscle. They're close enough that Jackson can smell the liquor on his breath and see the drunken flush that's crept across his skin, but he still has not a hair out of place.

"Thanks," mutters Jackson, flails his way free, and hurries to the bathroom, not looking around to see who saw that.

When he's finished his business, Shannon is waiting for him outside. It turns out basically everyone saw that. "Are you drunk already?" she asks, half amused, half annoyed. "I told you you need to pace yourself."

"I'm *not*," he begins, but her eyes grow wide, and he doesn't want to talk about his little spill in the quad anyway. He sighs and goes to pour himself a glass of water, then slams the pitcher down with unnecessary force, chugging all of it while maintaining eye contact with Shannon.

She looks extremely put upon, but she doesn't blink either.

"Who wants cake, " she says loudly. The whole place cheers.

"Aw—" protests Jackson, but everything is already in motion. Two big cakes come out, one ice cream and one dairy free. They have sparklers in them. Everyone looks at him, sings to him, laughs as he struggles to blow out any fires without melting anything or burning his eyebrows.

He's cutting the cake and grimacing awkwardly for the photos, when

someone calls out, paparazzi style, from the kitchen door: “Hey, over here!”

He turns to see his roommate, Kris, wearing slacks and an ugly polo, brandishing a phone in his face. He’s been out of school for a year now, and he looks not a bit intimidated by the rich douchebag pageantry.

Jackson flips him off, and Kris takes another picture.

“Classic,” he says, and pockets his phone.

When the crowd’s thinned out some, Kris leans against the counter to say hello properly.

“Happy birthday,” he says, cracking open a beer. “I got you some whiskey but now that seems kind of redundant.

Jackson grins at him. “Thanks.”

“So how’s the party? Looking at it now, I’m glad we don’t have to clean up.”

“It’s… you know. It’s big. Shannon always tries to outdo herself.”

“That’s our girl.”

“You know what though,” says Jackson abruptly. “I’m actually ready to head home.”

Kris raises his eyebrows. “Really? You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Kris doesn’t bother hiding his relief, just pulls his keys out of his pocket. “Tacos?” he suggests.

“Yeah, holy shit.”

“My treat.”

“Obviously.”

Kris snorts, and they slip outside into the slight chill and his immortal little Honda.

Jackson realizes which class he knows Jeremy from later in the week, when he goes to the library for his work study. He's pretty much got the hang of Stats, so he wormed his way into a TA position to try and shore up a little extra cash. Jeremy is tucked away in a corner, the only one who got here earlier than Jackson, playing PUBG and dead to the world.

Jackson watches him silently over his shoulder for a minute. He's pretty good. He waits politely for Jeremy to die, then says, "Hi."

Jeremy nearly jumps out of his chair. "Holy shit, dude." He takes out his headphones.

"Sorry," says Jackson, although he is not.

"Oh. Jackson, hey. Are you here for the study group?"

He allows himself some slight smugness. "I am the study group."

If Jeremy's surprised, he's also gracious. "Oh, thank god. I have questions."

Jackson sits down with him, ignoring the relief that floods his body as he gets off his problem leg.

After a few minutes it seems clear that Jeremy actually has a pretty good handle on the material. "I think you're good, man," Jackson tells him, though he almost hates to admit it.

"Thanks." Jeremy doesn't relax though. His big shoulders stay hunched and his unmoussed hair keeps threatening to fall in his eyes.

"Hey. Can I ask why you came to this?"

Jeremy shrugs. "Habit. And, uh, I do keep falling asleep in that class."

Jackson snorts.

"I just… gotta make sure I *know* it, you know?"

Jackson nods, like it's all clicking into place. "Okay, now I see why you and Shannon get along."

"Oh." Jeremy smiles awkwardly. "Yeah."

The silence is weird. Jackson wonders why rich people are so high maintenance.

Jeremy clears his throat. “So... how did you guys meet?”

At least he’s trying. Jackson drums his pencil on the table. “She had a friend in track so she was at our meets a lot. But she made it *very* clear she was not a groupie.”

Jeremy nods. “Same, some mutual friends of ours thought we’d have things in common.”

Money, Jackson doesn’t say. Instead, sheepishly: “She swept me off my feet a little. Like she was a freshman and I was a sophomore and she was the one finding us booze.”

“Yeah,” says Jeremy vaguely. He’s been tensing up the more they stay on the subject. “She’s, she’s assertive.”

While they’re both struggling to find a path forward for this conversation, one of their phones lets out a discordantly cheerful trill. It’s Jeremy’s —he picks it up and quickly swipes out of a few apps before setting it back down.

“Sorry,” he says. Jackson would barely have noticed, except for just *how* quickly he’d done it.

It was a familiar sound, but Jackson can’t quite place it. He’s heard it at home, on Kris’s phone…

Oh, *Grindr* .

Jackson plays it cool, pretending he didn’t notice anything, and thank god some other dumbasses are finally trickling in to study.

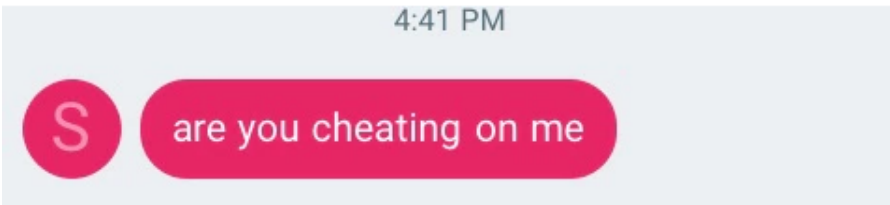
It turns out the foot injury was more serious than Jackson thought. His Achilles tendon is ruptured, and the coaches and campus doctors all say that he needs to stay off it. He needs surgery if he wants to run track again before graduating, which he has to do if he wants to keep his scholarship and graduate at all. That means going to the hospital, and Jackson hasn’t seen a real doctor since he was a teenager. He’s still on his parents’ insurance, so he has to call home and talk to them about it, which ruins his whole month.

Afterwards, the campus clinic gives him a boot and a pair of crutches. He feels clumsy and stupid in them, like a dog in a cone. He’s already losing money because he works on his feet and had to cut back on his

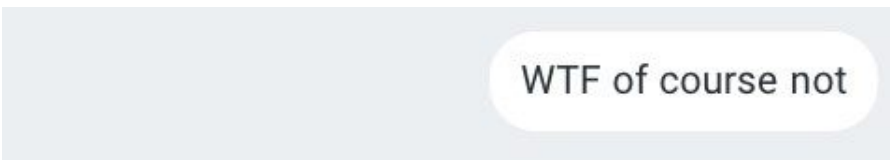
Trader Joe's hours. He can't go to practice, either, so now he has no money and no friends but more free time than he's ever had in his life.

Weeks and weeks pass as he tutors and works out his upper body more, as it gets harder and harder to sleep at night. He plays a lot of video games and smokes a lot of weed and snaps at Shannon when she drives him to physical therapy and tries to give him financial advice. He's always in pain, and it's getting harder to hide the edge in his voice.

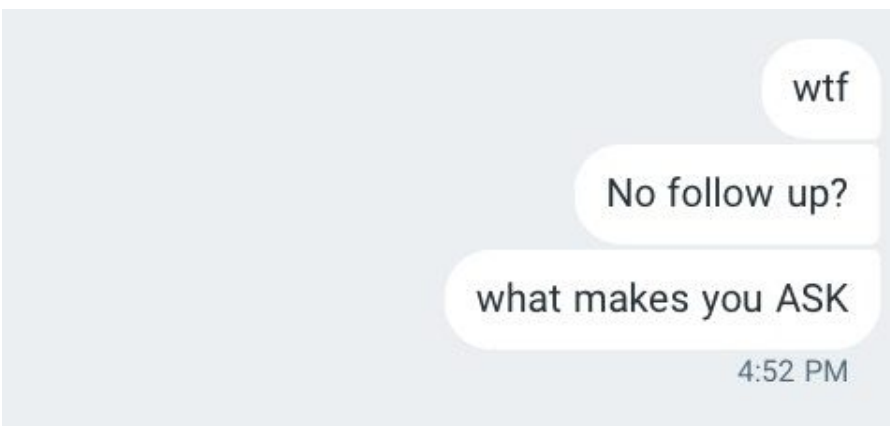
Out of nowhere, on a Wednesday afternoon:



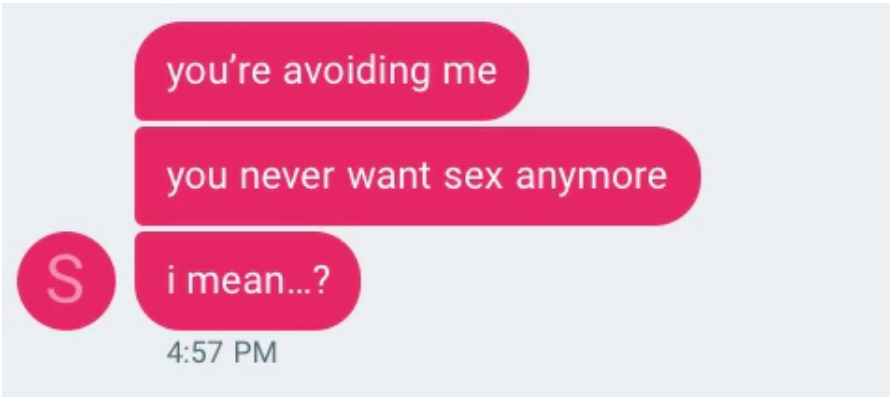
Jackson sits straight up on the couch, starts *several* replies that he thinks better of, and settles for,



It lacks elegance, but it does the job. She doesn't write back, which is almost as insulting as asking the question in the first place.

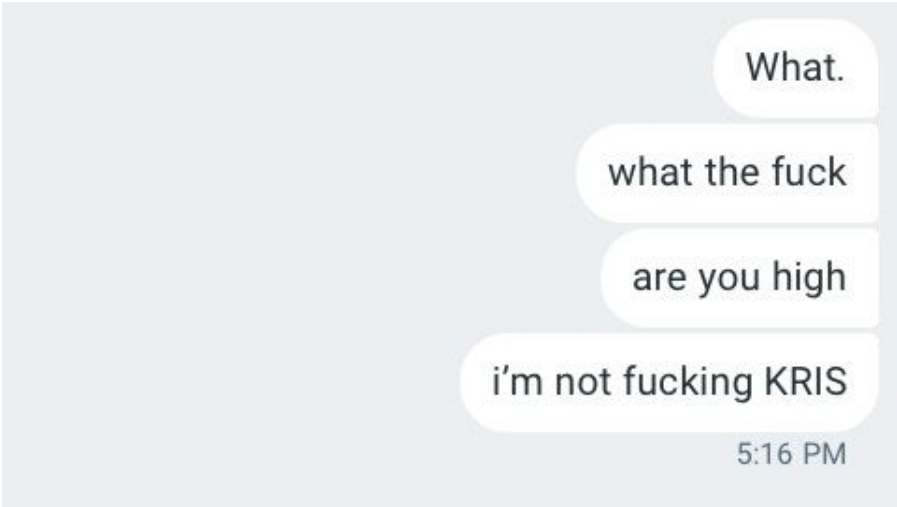


He limps to the kitchen and gets a glass of water while he waits. As soon as his phone buzzes he rushes back to it.

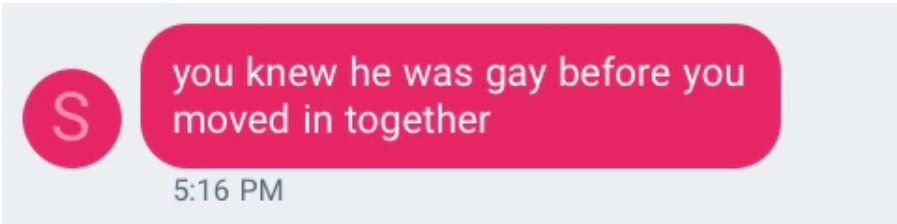


For fuck's sake.

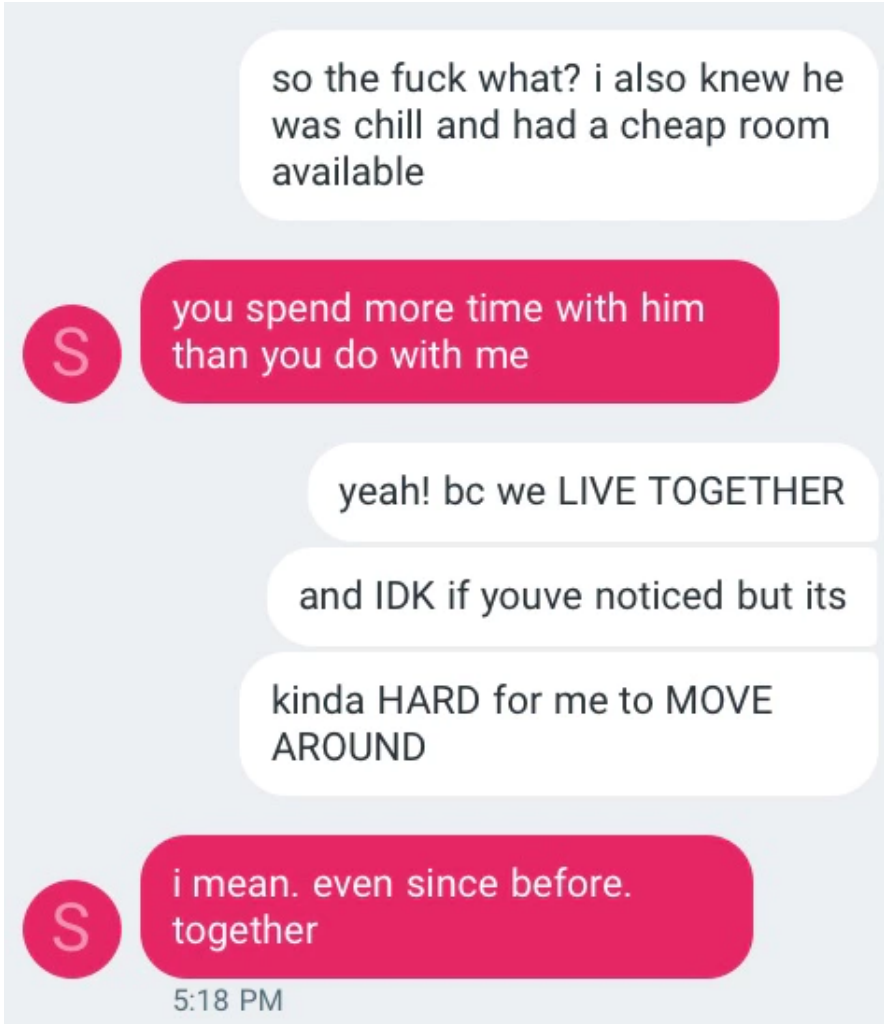
Jackson actually chokes.



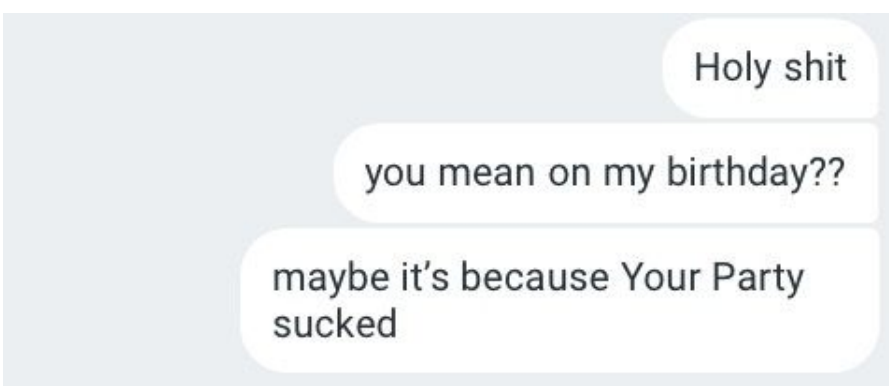
It takes her over two minutes to compose her next message.



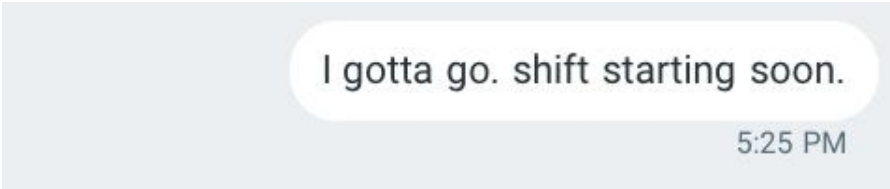
"*What* ," he hisses aloud.


so the fuck what? i also knew he was chill and had a cheap room available
S
you spend more time with him than you do with me
yeah! bc we LIVE TOGETHER
and IDK if youve noticed but its
kinda HARD for me to MOVE AROUND
S
i mean. even since before. together
5:18 PM

Jackson feels like he's losing his mind.



He grinds his teeth, and when she doesn't start a reply, adds,



Which is a straight-up lie, but he knows she gave up keeping track of his schedule weeks ago.

He waits in morbid suspense to see if she gets the last word in, but apparently she's said her piece.

"Bitch," he says, almost in amazement, almost impressed. He's keyed up like before a race, but there's nothing to do here to get rid of it. He kicks the arm of the sofa with his good foot just to blow off a fraction of the steam.

"Easy on the furniture, buddy," says Kris, who is sitting on the carpet with his back against the couch, playing Smash.

Jackson growls miserably and slumps over.

"Sorry," he says.

"You good?" says Kris, without looking away from the screen.

"Yeah…"

Kris lets it hang there, doesn't chase it. "Fine, don't tell me," he says, with an audible eyeroll. "You've only been having a meltdown back there for like half an hour."

"Shannon thinks I'm cheating on her."

Kris snorts. "What the fuck?"

"That's what I said!"

"With *who?"*

"I know, right!" He tries to power through the awkward strain in his voice. "Who has the time?"

Kris pauses the game to turn around and fully look at Jackson, whose cringe, unfortunately, says it all.

“You’re kidding,” he says. *“Me? ”*

Jackson spreads his hands helplessly.

“No offense, Jackson,” says Kris, and turns back to his game, “but your friends are the worst.”

It’s pretty hard to argue with that.

Jackson tosses his phone out of arm’s reach and stretches listlessly out on the couch, watching Kris play. As dry as his tone was, the tips of his ears have turned faintly red.

After a few minutes, Jackson clears his throat. “Is it woke if I think Bayonetta’s hot?”

Kris reaches back blindly to pat him on the knee. “You’re straight. No one cares if you’re woke."

"I don’t think this is going to work.” says Shannon, just a few weeks later.

Jackson takes a moment to absorb this. It’s not a surprise, really, so right now he’s trying to figure out how to react.

Shannon's lip trembles. "It’s just, we’ve been together for so long, and you’re going to be a senior soon, and things have changed so much between us that I just… don’t see us having a future together."

Jackson doesn’t say anything.

Shannon bursts into tears.

“I’m sorry,” she says, trying to blot under her eyes with her napkin. “This is just. Really hard for me."

They’re in a bakery. People are staring.

Jackson walks home on his crutches because he took the bus into the city and bought a fifteen dollar sandwich, which he did not eat, all to get dumped, and he’s already over his budget for the week. That, and he needs the hike to wear himself out or he’s truly going to freak out.

It takes over an hour, and he almost regrets it by the end. His ankle throbs with every heartbeat and his lips are chapping in the chill air. This was his first day off in like three weeks, couldn't she have done this on a school night?

When he lets himself into the apartment, he immediately pitches himself face first onto the sofa. He takes deep breaths, focusing on the work of pulling oxygen through corduroy, and lets the cushion absorb a couple of plausibly deniable tears. He takes care to muffle his face and indulges himself in one long, horrible bellow.

Someone clears their throat.

He jackknifes off the couch to his feet, sending a jolt up his leg. "*What*," he squawks, heart pounding.

For a wild moment he wonders if he's in the right apartment. There's a stranger in his living room, standing awkwardly by the door.

"Who the fuck are you?" he demands.

"Uhh. I'm Steven? I'm just… waiting for Kris…"

Jackson forces himself to relax. "Jesus Christ, dude, you scared the shit out of me."

The feeling is clearly mutual.

They stand there for an agonizing moment before Kris hurries out of his bedroom, half in half out of a denim jacket. "Oh cool, you guys have met," he says, and hauls the guy toward the door by the arm.

"Don't wait up," he says.

Jackson doesn't. He gets drunk alone instead.

Less than two weeks later, Shannon and Jeremy start going out.

"What would you say is the 'classy' length of time to wait after a breakup before dating someone else?" Jackson wonders.

"Just block her," says Kris, for at least the third time since the news broke.

"No," says Jackson.

Kris rolls his eyes, puts his headphones back on, and returns to his game. Without his improving influence, Jackson goes online and starts digging.

Jeremy's family is pretty religious, which isn't really a surprise. His mom's the vice principal of some Christian private school in Singapore. Excruciating. At least he came by his whole vibe honestly.

They're also worth millions, enough so that his family gets the occasional article written about them in those fancy house magazines. His eyes glaze over the words, but the pictures speak for themselves.

He visits Jeremy's Instagram expecting lavish displays of affluenza, but it's surprisingly sparse. He posts the bare minimum to appear alive. Aside from the occasional shot of his apartment, it looks like any other normie college boy's account. He doesn't know what he was expecting, exactly.

"He's into dudes, you know."

"Really," says Kris, perking up with genuine interest for the first time in, regrettably, days.

"I saw him on Grindr."

Kris tilts his head.

"Saw him using Grindr," he clarifies. "I wasn't on there myself."

Kris snorts. "Yeah. He doesn't seem like the type to show his face on there anyway." He taps his phone pensively against his chin. "Do you think he was just fucking around between relationships, or does he have like, a full-on double life. Or—" He makes a face. "—is he just there for compliments."

"Why do you wanna know?" says Jackson. "Cruising for rich boys?"

"*No*," Kris tells him. "Although, yes."

On New Year's Eve, Jackson has no plans. The track guys are back in town for training but he can't afford the cover at the place they're going to, Kris is still with his family for the holidays, and he, Jackson, is emphatically single. He calls in sick to work—a counterproductive

move since he just got his hours back and the manager will know he's transparently just fucking around tonight, but he's ready to make it worth it. He's ordered a pizza, he bought some edibles at a dispensary with his legal ID just for the novelty of it, and he is looking at other people's party posts like a bona fide sad sack.

White Jackson has a new baby nephew.

Bailey From Stats apparently has like five dogs back home.

The bougie kids are all in some kind of arms race to "casually" fit their Christmas watches and necklaces in their NYE selfies without "drawing attention to them."

Shannon and Jeremy are commemorating their ~two month~ anniversary with a party at his ridiculous condo, and true to form Shannon's invited everyone that will fit inside.

He's already scrolled past when the penny drops. It's funny, actually, because as far as Jackson knows, he was only dumped one month ago.

He stares blankly at the post for a full minute.

Then he stands up, ignoring the residual twinge in his foot. He knows where Jeremy lives from cyberstalking him before, and if anyone's parties are easy to crash, Shannon's are.

"*Are you cheating on me?* " he singsongs, rooting around in the cupboard over the fridge till he finds the nastiest, highest-proof liquor they have. It's banana-and-Everclear flavored, he and Kris got it out of morbid curiosity and tried it once and never touched it again, but tonight is its time to shine. He takes three shots in rapid succession, then has to run to the fridge to find some root beer to chase it down, it's *disgusting*.

He takes a thermos filled with alcohol with him on the bus, and by the time he gets there it's already past 10 and the gummy he forgot he ate has also started to kick in.

When Jackson's eventually buzzed up, he arrives just as Jeremy is finishing a toast. What twentysomething gives toasts? Who does that? He's smiling and gracious, wearing all black, in a way that is tailored and probably cost more than all the clothes Jackson owns. Shannon is hanging off his arm—literally clutching his bicep to her chest, stars in her eyes.

They look good together, is the thing. Their matching Little Ivy prep look, their professionally styled hair, their little champagne flutes, their cheeks rosy with drink. Jeremy's so much bigger than her. He can probably pick her up and fuck her against the wall, which was a fantasy she had once mentioned wistfully to Jackson.

Anyway, whatever he said, the toast is over now, there's some

cheering, the music comes back on, and Jackson helps himself to a drink. The specialty here seems to be picklebacks with top shelf whiskey and like, artisanal brine. He's quickly approaching the part of the night where you can't really taste anything, but even so, they're really good.

He wasn't worried about not belonging. People know him. Some familiar faces from class strike up conversation. Pleasant talk about nothing. People are glad to see his face again. He can't really process what he's saying before he says it, it gets a laugh, so he must have been funny.

At one point he catches Shannon watching him. She doesn't look mad —she actually gives him a gentle smile. Something curdles in Jackson's stomach and he looks away.

All of a sudden he feels claustrophobic. He takes his flask out on the balcony, which of course there is one, and breathes in some fresh air.

It's a great view. City lights, premature fireworks.

His phone buzzes. It's Kris.

Kris starts typing, but Jackson pockets his phone rather than risk exposing himself to rational advice.

Someone else comes outside. Jackson automatically moves over to make room, but when he sees it's Jeremy he dearly wishes he hadn't.

"Hey, man, it's good to see you."

Jackson raises his thermos in a sarcastic toast of his own, but Jeremy just echoes the gesture with his champagne.

"I'm glad you're finally off those crutches. You're feeling better?"

Jackson arranges an empty smile on his face but doesn't say anything.

"I know, um. I know Shannon's glad to see you doing well too."

Jackson's smile feels like it's intensifying, which is just as well because he has *no* idea how to respond to that. He feels like a crazy person.

Jeremy's losing steam. "Well, happy New Year." He gives him an overfamiliar clap on the shoulder and heads back inside.

Jackson drinks more. These bitches should be ashamed to look him in the eye, not gracing him with their pity.

He's not sure how long he spends out there, but when the music cuts out again it's because the countdown has started. What's he going to do after this? Crawl home? Thank them for a lovely evening? Fuck that. Things are going to be on his terms for once.

Everyone's gathered around the TV, chanting, and it takes him a moment to find the happy couple. They're holding hands.

"Ten! Nine! Eight!

Jackson approaches them, but neither of them even notices him.

"Seven!"

Jackson grabs Jeremy by the shoulder, hard, and hauls him around away from Shannon.

"Six!"

He flinches like he's about to get punched, but instead Jackson drags him forward and mashes their mouths together aggressively.

The people around them explode into hooting and laughter moments before the ball drops and the whole house cheers. The music and the party blowers are deafening, but the sweet sound of Shannon yelling “What the *fuck* ?” still reaches his ears. He grins, encouraged, and kisses Jeremy harder, taking advantage of his shocked stillness to lean in and slip him an ostentatious bit of tongue. That finally snaps him out of it, and he shoves Jackson away.

Shannon's stomped off somewhere, and someone is slapping him on the back like he’s won some kind of competition. Jeremy stares at him, wild-eyed, and Jackson laughs in his face.

The celebrations continue, and he can’t stop cackling, high on spite, so high he’s dizzy and his ears are ringing. Jeremy is probably following Shannon; Jackson staggers away from the cheering to find something to lean on. He sits on the arm of a leather couch to rest, and that’s all he remembers.

He wakes up with his face crushed into slippery upholstery and a small puddle of drool. His mouth tastes like death.

Jackson drags himself upright, focuses his burning eyes on the open can of La Croix on the coffee table in front of him, and takes a deep swig. It’s both warm and flat, but this is a matter of survival and he

gargles it without flinching.

“Oh good,” says someone, “You’re awake.”

A second later, a sound like a motor starts up right by his head, right at the pitch to make it throb hardest. He scrambles away, hissing—it’s Jeremy, stone faced, dustbusting potato chip crumbs off the sofa.

“What the fuck,” Jackson mumbles, scrubbing at his eyes. No one else is around. The place looks even more massive without a crowd of people inside. It must be so expensive to air condition.

“Why did you do that?”

He rubs at his slack face. “Do what?”

Jeremy turns off the vacuum.

“Why. Did you do that.”

“Oh,” Jackson grins, remembering. “ *That* .” He considers, then shrugs. “Nothing personal, that was all for Shannon.” He cranes his neck. “Where’d she go, anyway?”

Jeremy gestures around at the empty place. “She decided not to stay over tonight. No idea why.”

“Wait, really?”

“*No*, not really.”

Jackson laughs joylessly and it still hurts his head. “God, you’re such a dick.”

“I think I’ve been an incredibly gracious host, considering.” His face, usually blandly handsome, is still so liquor-flushed that he looks either sunburnt or apoplectic. “You didn’t have to involve me in your bullshit. If I see any of that on Insta later, I swear to God…”

“Dude, will you fucking unclench? First of all, of course you will, because it was hilarious. And anyway, it was obviously a joke. No one’s gonna care.”

Jeremy opens his mouth, but stops at the last second and just looks away. He goes back to his cleaning, stalking through the living room and chucking trash violently into a bag.

Jackson settles back on the couch and crosses his arms thoughtfully. “You know,” he says, “first I think I have you all figured out. You’re a good, reliable, boring boy—"

Jeremy shoots him an offended look.

“—But then I learn were knowingly committing adultery for *weeks* and it’s like, now I don’t know what to think.”

If he’s hoping for shame, or anger, no dice. Jeremy just looks at him like he’s stupid. “You guys weren’t married.”

Jackson points at him. “Getting off on a technicality! So you do admit you were cheating.”

Jeremy’s lips thin. “No, *Shannon* was cheating. I don’t make her decisions for her.”

“Oh I see,” says Jackson, rolling his eyes. “You’re too *feminist* to be a bad person.”

“No, I—” Jeremy steps closer to the couch, hemming Jackson in uncomfortably. He sits up straight, refusing to be cowed.

“I don’t cheat,” Jeremy insists, looking him square in the eyes. "I never have.”

Jackson sneers. “Well, even if that *were* true, you definitely have now."

He realizes as he says it that he’s basically trying to get punched in the face. Like, maybe that’s all this night has ever been about. When Jeremy moves, he can’t help flinching. But he’s just stepping even closer, slipping between Jackson’s knees.

He looks back up, startled, to see Jeremy studying him intently, and then he feels a hand under his chin, tipping his face back. He watches Jeremy lick his lips and realizes what’s about to happen.

This kiss is slow, like how he’s heard time dilates during a car crash. Jeremy is wearing chapstick, and his breath is heavy with whiskey. It isn’t long before he deepens the kiss, echoing what Jackson did before, except his tongue lingers, probes and fills his mouth until Jackson finally jerks back, spitting it out. Jeremy just moves lower and presses his face into the crook of his neck, mouthing over the sensitive skin there till Jackson shivers.

He shoves Jackson's shirt up, exposing his nipples to the air, running his hands across his ribs. None of this feels real. He can't help arching into the touch, because his traitor body will take what it can get.

Then Jeremy undoes his belt buckle.

"Whoa—dude—"

He ignores him. Jackson hears the clank of his belt hitting the floor, feels Jeremy's fingers on his zipper, his hot palm pressing on him firmly through his jeans. Jeremy looks up from his work and stares him down with a question.

It's a bad idea to keep going, but stopping would be even worse.

“Well?” spits Jackson, and bucks his hips.

Jeremy doesn’t ask again. He pulls out Jackson’s cock—he’s all the way hard—and wraps his lips around him without preamble.

Jackson’s body comes to life. Suddenly it feels *too* real, the sensations overwhelming his cloudy brain, the quiet, wet noises obscene in the still room. Jackson hovers his hands over Jeremy’s bobbing head, fascinated and repelled by his muscular shoulders and the scrape of his stubble.

Just when he starts to relax into it, Jeremy grabs him by the balls with shocking confidence. Jackson gasps, and Jeremy practically growls in response, swallowing him down and flexing his throat. He picks up the pace, the tendons in his forearms standing out with the effort, punching involuntary gagging noises out of his own windpipe, and dragging his fingernails hard down Jackson’s exposed thighs, until Jackson absolutely loses it. He comes with a groan, curling his body around Jeremy’s skull and fucking into it as hard as his body demands. Jeremy takes it all.

Jackson collapses back against the cushions, chest heaving, before Jeremy finally pulls off his cock. Rather than swallow, he lunges forward, retches, and spits up a throatful of slimy come onto Jackson’s exposed torso. Jackson howls in disgust and struggles to sit up, but Jeremy, crawling up his body, shoves him roughly back down by the shoulder—he feels his hips jerk in response—then plants his knees on either side of him and starts working his own cock furiously.

Before Jackson even has time to react, Jeremy is shuddering and coming all over his chest.

He watches his stomach twitch. His heart is racing, the two loads are cold and sticky on his skin, and there’s no sound at all but the two of them panting.

The spring semester starts a couple weeks later.

He doesn’t see anyone from the party until then, and he doesn’t find out if Jeremy’s in the same Stats class as him again until the first day of school.

The syllabus washes over him and his eyes roam until they find Jeremy sitting stiff and alert three rows down. When class is

dismissed, Jeremy turns around to pack his things and their eyes meet. It's kind of impressive how fast the color drains out of his face when Jackson smiles and waves.

Jeremy crams his laptop into his bag and hurriedly squeezes past people in his row.

So that's how it's gonna be.

Jackson doesn't rush after him, but he doesn't let Jeremy out of his sight. He's not sure what he's going to say, but he has to say *something* . He'd hoped Jeremy would broach the subject first, but, well.

He keeps thinking about what happened. The sheer chaos and confusion was the biggest rush he'd had since he'd stopped running. The high of it had stayed with him for hours after the hangover was gone.

Jeremy meets up with Shannon outside the building and kisses her cheek, which is actually pretty perfect. Jackson adjusts his backpack and approaches them.

"Hey," he says to Jeremy, ignoring Shannon entirely. He can sense her bristling. "I can already tell I'm gonna need a lot of help this semester. Please tell me you're coming to study group tonight?"

Jeremy looks like he wants to strangle him for a split second before he smiles blandly. "...Yeah. I'll see you there."

"Great!" Jackson beams and walks off, delights as the sounds of Shannon's barely hushed indignation fades behind him.

There's no study group that night, and Jackson certainly doesn't need help, but Jeremy got the message and meets him at their usual spot in the library.

"Did you have to do that in front of *Shannon* ?"

Jackson looks up from his phone. Anger looks different on Jeremy sober. More pale and rigid and awkward.

"You were avoiding me," Jackson tells him simply.

"*You're* reading into things."

"Am I?" When Jeremy looks away, Jackson sighs. "Come on, we should talk. " He gestures at the seat across from him. Jeremy takes it

with some hesitation, looking around to see if anyone else is within earshot.

“So,” Jackson starts. “The party.”

“That was a mistake,” says Jeremy quicky.

Isn’t it always, with Jackson.

Jeremy’s arms are crossed. “We should never have gone that far. That’s it. It’s not something we have to talk about.”

Jackson glowers at him for a moment, but slowly his face fades into a look of uncertainty. If Jeremy knew him at all, this would worry him. Instead, he relaxes.

“Okay? So let’s just forget it.” He’s giving Jackson a relieved smile, like they’re finally on the same page.

But Jackson still looks doubtful. “But don’t you think…”

There it is: Jeremy freezes. It’s great.

“Don’t you think Shannon deserves to know about what happened? It feels kinda shitty, not telling her.”

Jeremy stares at him. The sudden fear in his eyes is so, so gratifying. It feels good to feel despicable.

“What do you want?” Jeremy grits out.

Jackson considers. “Want? I don’t know... I guess normally I like someone to take me to dinner before sucking my dick.”

Which isn’t strictly true, but it’s worth it for the look on Jeremy’s face.

Chapter End Notes

We'll be adding tags as the story progresses.

Chapter 2: Help, My Girlfriend's Ex-Boyfriend is Blackmailing Me?

It's Thursday evening, the first day of Jeremy's spring semester. He had high hopes this morning, but things have already seriously derailed.

He spent the last week double- and triple-checking social media for any evidence of that crazy Jackson Chen ambushing him with a kiss on New Years, as well as suppressing his memories of anything else they did together that night. It had started to look like he'd be able to put it all behind him, but that lasted basically until he stepped on to campus.

Now he's already canceled his tentative dinner plans with Shannon, the person he's actually dating, and is at a gastropub sitting across from the lunatic in question, unwillingly reliving every moment of drunkenly blowing him.

Jackson Chen, in contrast to Jeremy's internal meltdown, looks perfectly at home. He orders a Corona and sits back to nurse it, regarding Jeremy with a bland, polite expression. He wants Jeremy nervous, but Jeremy refuses to give him the satisfaction.

When the food arrives, Jackson gets a little more animated. He bites ravenously into his fourteen dollar burger. "Ugh, I needed *meat* ," he moans with his mouth full. The worst part is, Jeremy doesn't think he's making a gay joke. The self awareness just isn't there.

"You sure you're not having anything?" Then again, around the half-chewed food, Jackson is looking at him with a strange canniness.

Jeremy's gaze drifts to the window. The people outside. How he longs to be among them. "I'm good," he says.

Jackson just shrugs and tucks in. "Suit yourself."

They sit there, in silence, while Jackson eats the entire burger, and all of his fries, which he does one at a time, apparently to maximize the surface area he can coat with ketchup.

He finishes his beer, sets it back on the table, and says, "I want

another."

Jeremy spreads his hands, frustrated. "Okay?"

"Thanks," says Jackson, and smiles at him placidly.

Ah. So Jeremy will be paying for the privilege, too.

"All right," he says, "seriously. What do you want?"

"Besides another beer." Jackson has still got this shit-eating grin on his face.

"Correct," Jeremy says coldly.

Jackson ponders, or at least pretends to.

"Do you have a Costco card?" he asks.

"Uh." Jeremy blinks. "Yeah."

"Course you do," he says dismissively. He leans forward and holds out his hand. "Let me borrow it."

Jeremy doesn't move.

Jackson wiggles his fingers. "Unless you want me so hungry and confused I let slip something I shouldn't."

That's not an option.

Jeremy narrows his eyes, takes out his wallet and pushes over the card. He's barely used it anyway, he won't miss it.

"Dumb photo," Jackson notes, "but it looks enough like me from…" He squints, holding the card a foot away. Two feet.

"Was there anything else," sighs Jeremy.

Jackson pockets the card and gets back to business. He steeples his fingers. "I also need a ride to Costco."

Jeremy sits back and crosses his arms. "I'm not driving you to Costco."

"That's fine," says Jeremy agreeably, "you can Uber me."

He clenches his teeth. "Whatever."

“Also, I need money for Costco.”

Jeremy lets that one hang in the air for a long time. Jackson just blinks guilelessly.

He breathes out slowly. “So we’re both clear here, you *are* blackmailing me.”

Jackson purses his lips. “That’s such a harsh word. Think of it as trickle-down economics. You’re supporting your community.” He gestures at him with his empty bottle. “It’s very charitable, very Christian.”

Jeremy doesn’t talk about his family, but it’s easy to find out about them. Jackson wouldn’t be the first to Google him.

He’s still watching carefully, still trying to get a rise out of him. “You know, you should be thanking me for the opportunity to do penance.”

Jeremy rolls his eyes. “Cool.”

“Mm. It really is. Pay it backwards, that’s what I always say. I’m entitled to something for my pain and suffering.”

“You should be a lawyer. It’s not too late to change majors.”

“I bet you’d like that.”

If Jeremy himself were the type to litigate, he’d point out that Shannon had let him assume she was single when she started pursuing him, that he only realized she wasn’t when he met Jackson at his birthday party, and that pretending not to know anything had been the only way forward he could see.

If there’s one thing he’s learned from his parents, it’s never to give anyone the ammunition.

“So how does this work?” he says, trying to sound as bored as possible. “You send me a receipt and I reimburse you?”

Jackson looks incredulous. “Bro, if I could pay for bulk groceries up front I’d be asking for something fun.” His eyes light up at the idea. “Like a hoverboard.”

Jeremy inhales, discreetly checking his phone. “Then…?”

Jackson reaches across the table suddenly and swipes the phone out of

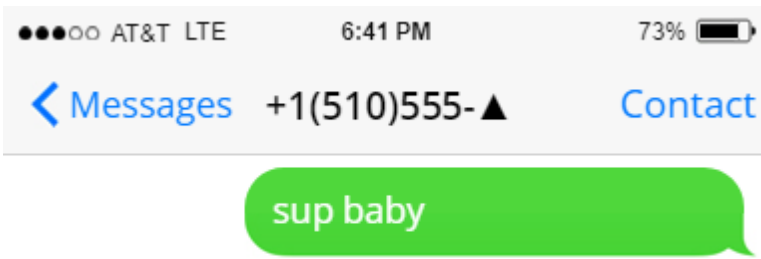
his hand.

“ *Hey* ,” says Jeremy, grabbing for it, but Jackson leans away, typing quickly. In the time it takes for Jeremy to consider standing up and making a scene, Jackson finishes and tosses it back to him.

A second later, Jackson’s own phone buzzes on the table.

“I’ll bill you,” he says, and winks.

At long last, Jeremy can’t sit here a second longer. He slaps forty dollars on the table and walks away without getting change. It isn’t until he’s back in his car that he looks at his phone to read the text Jackson sent himself.



He could block the number, but he doesn’t.

He makes his apologies to Shannon when she comes over that night, but she just waves him off.

“First day of classes, I had stuff too.”

She’s so nice, so chill. Jeremy kisses her and feels like a monster.

When his phone rings he flinches, assuming it’s Jackson, but it’s even worse. It’s his father.

He clears his throat as he goes to the adjoining hallway before picking up and answering as casually as he can, “Hello, Dad.”

“How are you, Jun Hao?”

“Good, and you?”

“I’m coming to America soon.”

“Ah yeah, that’s right. What day are you landing again?”

“The twentieth. I’ll be in San Francisco for a month or so.”

That’s longer than he said in the email. He tries to sound happy. “That’s great!”

“I’m looking forward to visiting you near the university.”

“Me too, Dad.”

“You should see if you have time to come to the city for dinner, too.”

“I hope so.”

“But of course I’ll have to come over and see the place I’m paying for.”

“Well, I’m taking good care of it.”

“Good. How are classes?”

“Mm, I don’t know yet, we just started today.”

His voice changes, sounding almost emotive. “Are you still going out with that girlfriend of yours?”

He’s been like this for two months, but it’s still kind of bizarre to hear him so excited about Shannon, or about anything Jeremy’s involved in. In high school he’d been strictly forbidden from dating, which had honestly been a relief. Looking back, his parents had probably wanted him to act more upset about it.

“Yeah,” says Jeremy cautiously.

“You’ll have to introduce me. Bring her along for dinner, we’ll all eat together.”

Jeremy looks over to where Shannon is slouched on his sofa, mouth hanging open, staring at her phone.

“Aah, that would be great, I wish we could. She’s just… really busy right now.”

“I see. Well, let me know if things change.”

“I sure will.”

A pause.

“I’ll call you when I arrive.”

“Great. Safe travels.” He opens his mouth to start wrapping up, but his dad has already ended the call.

He sighs and shoves his phone in his pocket.

“How’s your dad?” Shannon calls, without looking up.

Jeremy feels a jolt of blind panic. Does Shannon understand Mandarin? He’d thought the only other language she knew was Korean, but she’d recently taken him by surprise by getting into an involved conversation with a Guatemalan taxi driver.

“How did you know I was talking to my dad?” he asks.

She grins at him, and points. “Because you get all annoyed, just like that.”

Jeremy grimaces. He takes a deep breath. “Sorry.”

That just makes her laugh, though. “You’re so fucking cute.”

Truthfully, he wouldn’t be dating Shannon at all if his father hadn’t taken this consulting gig.

College was the first time he’d gotten any real distance, geographically anyway, from his family. Freshman year was kind of a mess, but after that he’d started coming to terms with himself, experimenting, hooking up with guys. Now that his dad’s back in the picture—even though they haven’t even seen each other yet—he already feels like a child again, sullen and defensive.

It wasn’t like he was *out* out, but this is definitely a step back in.

Anyway, he does like Shannon. And he has eyes, he knows she’s objectively hot. Maybe he’s a little bi, maybe he can make this work for real. And if not… well, he still has time. Maybe he can wait to start seeing guys openly when his parents have passed on. God willing, they’ll stay in good health, so it’ll take, what, thirty years? He’ll be in his early fifties. People come out later in life, that’s a thing.

He’s starting to sound crazy even to himself, though, so maybe he

should just come clean. Control his own story, take the power away from Jackson. It's the decent thing to do, anyway.

He clears his throat. "Hey," he says to Shannon, who's been watching him space out this whole time. She raises her eyebrows.

"About Jackson."

She tenses and looks back down at her phone. "What about him?"

He clears his throat. "Do you have any idea why he, uh, acted like that at your party?"

She puts down the phone. She doesn't speak for a little.

"Okay. I… said something stupid to him. I regret it. But he'd been distant for months, even before his injury." She tucks her hair behind her ear, flustered. "Did you know sometimes after we had sex he'd like… go for a run? Who does that?"

"TMI," he says flatly, which makes her laugh again, encourages her.

"So, yeah, I jumped to a conclusion. I confronted him about it, and I guess I hit a nerve."

Jeremy has a dark suspicion he knows what she said.

"Uh-huh?"

She pushes her hair back again, nervously. "So, um… I guess, by making out with you, he was trying to prove he was... straight?"

"Okay. Like. How so?"

"I can't follow the logic either, but it definitely seemed pointed. So. That's my bad, I think."

"You called him gay."

She makes a face. "*Okay*, obviously my case wasn't airtight! I just wanted him to be honest with me, whatever *was* bothering him. And then I realized he'd never opened up to me, not once, not in our whole relationship really." She sighs explosively, like she's getting him out of her system, then smiles up at Jeremy almost shyly. "That's why it's so refreshing being with you. You're like a real adult. You actually talk and listen."

Jeremy smiles back and hates himself.

Later that evening, after Shannon's gone back to her place, his phone chimes.

When he swipes it open, he almost drops the phone on his face.

His finger hovers over the block button.

It's a hot picture though. Is the thing.

Jackson doesn't approach him at the next study group, which is almost more stressful than if he had. He doesn't bother Jeremy, doesn't hit him up for cash, just explains the homework and leaves.

He does eat a *very* crunchy Gala apple during their next class though, so apparently he really did use that Venmo request from the other day on groceries.

Jeremy watches him carefully, but Jackson doesn't seem to be paying attention to him at all. He seems listless. Bored, even.

It won't last. Jackson isn't stable. This can only escalate.

It isn't for another week that they're forced to work together for class.

Jeremy drags himself to the library at 10 p.m. on a Tuesday because Jackson insisted he only had time after work, only to find out the project is already done.

"What do you mean, you already wrote everything up?"

"Yeah," says Jackson aggressively. There are bags under his eyes. "Quid pro quo, bro."

Jeremy's brain almost refuses to process that sentence.

"Well that's… honorable I guess," he says, in a vague attempt at being

tactful, “but then why did you make me come all the way out here?”

Jackson doesn’t look away. “I also need new shoes,” he says without a hint of shame.

Jeremy throws his hands in the air. “Unbelievable.”

Jackson silently lifts a foot to show him the sole of his running shoe, and… he does have a point. The treads are worn all the way down, gone thin in some places. So just quit *running* so much, he wants to say. It weirds people out.

“I can’t believe you’d let me go shoeless,” Jackson says. When Jeremy looks up at him he’s giving him a mock pout. But he can’t keep it up for long, and that evil grin of his wins out. “Unless that’s what you’re into.”

“What… does that even mean?”

Jackson just laughs. “ *God* , you’re uptight.”

“Whatever.” Impatient, Jeremy pulls up Venmo. “Fifty?”

Jackson scoffs. “A hundred, cheapskate.”

Jeremy fires off the payment and puts his phone away. “You know, I could have done that from my place, too.”

Jackson rolls his eyes, puts his hand on Jeremy’s belt, and drags him closer.

Oh.

Jackson leads him to the bathroom on the quiet floor in the library and crowds him into a stall. Jeremy feels exposed just standing there, two pairs of feet in plain view to anyone unlucky enough to come in after them. He can't imagine getting any more vulnerable than he already is.

Jackson grips Jeremy's bicep, not with overwhelming force but not gently either, and backs him slowly against the door. He watches Jeremy's face without blinking and moves his thumb in small circles, almost caresses.

It hurts how hard Jeremy's heart is pounding.

"Will you relax?" Jackson says, pushing his arm back still it strains his shoulder. "Everybody knows not to come in here."

There's no way Jeremy couldn't throw him off if he wanted to, but he doesn't.

He does say, "This is gross."

Jackson nods in solemn agreement. "You should really stop me," he says. "There are people you can call if you're being extorted."

He moves even closer, stepping between his legs. "So why don't you, hm? I'll tell you what I think." He presses his thigh against Jeremy's groin and leans in until his lips brush Jeremy's ear. "I think you like it," he breathes.

He's too close for secrets. They can both feel Jeremy reacting.

Even so, Jackson makes a big show of glancing down. "Aw, are you pent up?" he drawls. "I guess Shannon's not doing it for you."

Jeremy's face burns in humiliation. He tries to look away, though there aren't many other places to look.

"I wonder if you even like women." Jackson says. He's goading him now, getting in his face, looking for weakness, and unfortunately finding plenty. "You finger her, right?"

Jeremy slaps his arm away, shocked in spite of himself. "Excuse me?"

Jackson just sneers. "You know you can't just stick your dick in. She likes it while you eat her out, I hope you're doing that too."

"You're *disgusting* ."

Jackson gives him another vicious grin. "Make sure you really throw your back into it. She's small but she likes to go hard."

Jeremy shoves him, knocks him back against the toilet. "I'm leaving."

"Wait. Wait." Jackson holds up a placating hand. "Fine, let's focus on you."

Jeremy stops fumbling at the latch and gives him a suspicious look. Jackson moves back in and cups his dick through his jeans. When Jeremy can't help pushing forward into his hot palm, Jackson smirks.

Jeremy watches, not helping but not stopping him either, as Jackson pulls on his waistband, pops open his fly, worms his hand into his briefs, and pulls him out into the dim, stale air of the bathroom.

For all of Jackson's bravado, Jeremy can feel the hesitation in his grip. He wonders if this is the first time he's touched another guy's dick.

Jackson is a quick study though, or maybe just a chronic masturbator, because when he starts jerking him off he finds a rhythm quickly. Jeremy is short of breath and realizes with horror that he's in real danger of coming.

"You really do like this," Jackson says, like it's a surprise.

Jeremy just scoffs and tips his hips forward. *Get on with it.*

But rather than speed up, Jackson leans in close and presses an almost tender kiss to the crook of his neck. It's so unexpected that Jeremy breaks out in goosebumps.

Jackson hums in triumph and scrapes his teeth across Jeremy's skin till he's rewarded with a full-body shudder. He starts to bite down, but Jeremy seizes his arms and holds him just out of reach and hisses, "*No,* she'll see.. . "

He freezes after he says it. He feels terrible. Jackson just snorts, spits on his hand and pumps him harder, dark determination on his face.

Jeremy's breath is getting harsh.

Jackson watches his face. "You're so cute," he growls, like it's an insult.

Jeremy gasps, bucks his hips and can't hold back a whine. Jackson reaches up and covers his mouth roughly, and that's what pushes him over the edge.

He tenses and strains with sensation, then all but collapses against the door, fighting for breath around Jackson's hand. Jackson makes him work for it for a minute, then lets it fall away, apparently distracted by the sight of fresh come all over his other hand.

Then he looks up and meets Jeremy's eyes again. His face twists cruelly, and he shoves his fingers into Jeremy's mouth. He moves them in and out almost violently, making obscene, wet noises, forcing him to lick them clean.

Jeremy meets his eyes and gags on him.

Later that night—after he's changed his underwear and brushed his teeth thoroughly—Jeremy finds himself between Shannon's legs.

He does go down on her, of course. He may be inexperienced with women, but he is a gentleman and a feminist. And anyway, he tricked her into all this, so he owes her a good experience. It's the least he can do.

He's fingered her before too, but he's a little gun-shy. He doesn't want to hurt her by accident. Tonight, he experiments with pumping his hand a little harder, and right away Shannon gasps and grabs his hair

and grinds against his face so hard he sputters.

So Jackson wasn't bullshitting. How did he learn she liked this? How soon? Did she trust him enough to tell him what to do, or did he just have good instincts for pleasuring a girl? Jeremy can't decide which is worse.

When Shannon finally collapses into a sweaty, giggling heap, he excuses himself to wash his face, fish the pubes out of his mouth, and shake out his cramping fingers.

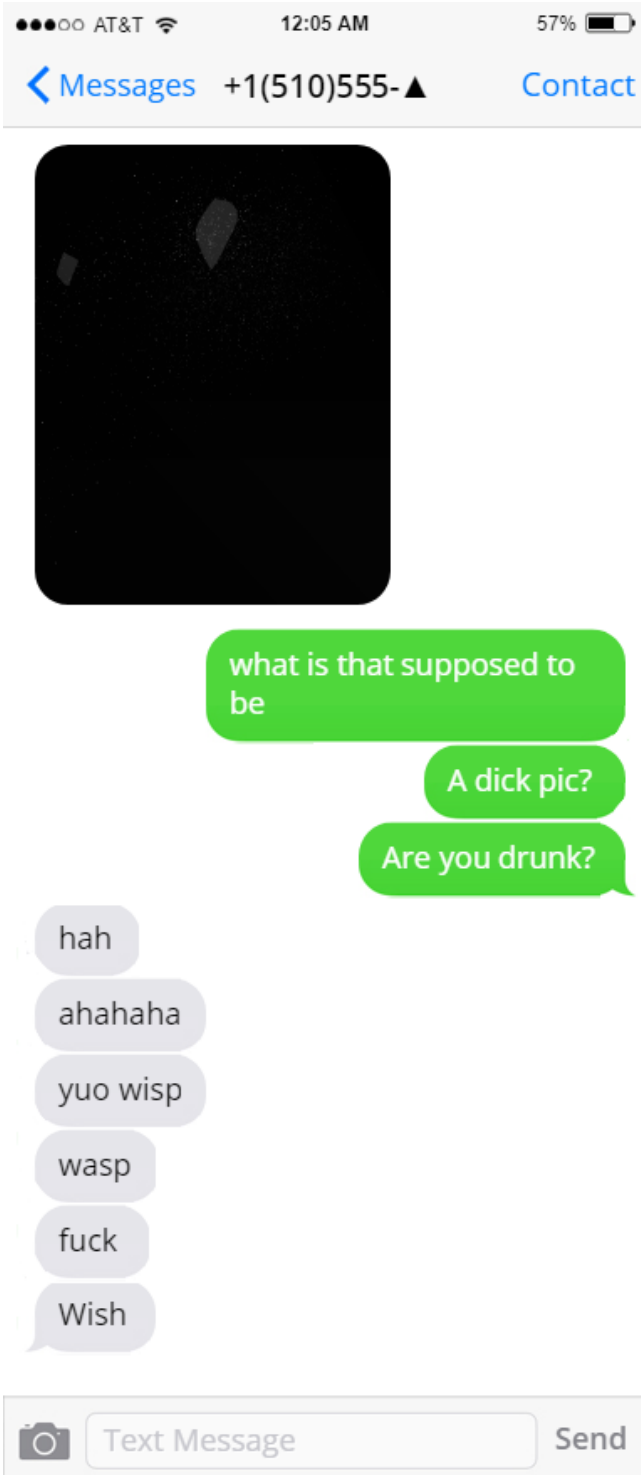
He wishes he could go home now, but she's expecting him to come back and cuddle. He'd rather be alone.

He's still awake hours later when his phone buzzes with a text. He opens it carefully to avoid waking Shannon.

It's Jackson, of course. He's sent him another photo.

Jeremy's stomach swoops with anticipation, but when he thumbs it open, it's completely black.

He squints at his phone.



Jackson sends another image. This one has the flash on, and just

shows a pale, ghostly hand giving him the finger.

He decides to be fashionably late to the next study group, hoping to avoid being alone with Jackson, but when he goes to their usual conference room, Jackson's the only one not there yet.

It makes Jeremy nervous. Despite his chaotic energy, the guy's usually on time.

Jackson doesn't show up for another ten minutes, banging into the doorframe and shuffling into the room with a grunted, "Sorry."

Jeremy rolls his eyes and looks away. Now that the suspense is over, he can finally get to work.

"So how far did you guys get," Jackson says, and based on the sounds he makes, fully hurtles his backpack onto the floor, and then his own body into a chair.

"Whoa, are you okay?" says someone.

"Yeah, man, you sound really bad."

"I'm fine," mutters Jackson, and this time Jeremy can hear it too. He sounds hoarse. He sounds *hammered* .

He looks up, expecting to see the ruddy, jeering tequila demon from his New Years party. Instead, Jackson looks ashen and listless, swaying slightly where he sits.

One of the girls catches Jeremy's eye. He doesn't know what she wants from him. He offers her his calculator, but she just shakes her head and looks away.

Jackson ignores all of them and starts pulling out his notes. "What was it you guys were confused on last week? He put more of that on the quiz than I expected, so we should definitely go over it again before the…" He squints into space, searching for the word. And searching. "...the… exam."

"Um. Jackson?" says the girl by Jeremy, gently. "It seems like maybe you need some rest."

Ben from Baseball is nodding in vigorous agreement. "Yeah dude, why don't you take the night off? We'll cover for you."

Jackson looks startled. He stares around blankly at them all. For a moment, Jeremy almost believes he's touched, until his face crumples into a snarl. He shoves his chair back with a screech.

"Fine," he growls, grabs his backpack, and stalks out in a not quite straight line. He slams the door behind him.

The room is left in stunned silence. All of a sudden, everyone is looking at Jeremy.

Oh.

They think the two of them are *friends* .

"...I'll go check on him," he says.

Jeremy catches up with Jackson in the parking lot, where his backpack seems to be interfering hugely with his sense of balance. Something is definitely wrong with him, but he's holding himself so stiffly Jeremy decides it can't be that he's drunk, just kind of sick.

He stands there for at least a minute, watching him try and fail to mount his bike over and over again.

When he finally does get off to a—very wobbly—start, Jeremy's conscience gets the best of him.

"Okay, stop," he calls.

Jackson twists around and loses balance again. "Fuck you," he says, but Jeremy tries not to take it personally.

"You can't bike home."

Jackson hops in place, frustrated. "No, it's totally easy, all you have to do is wash your bus pass by accident."

"You're impaired," Jeremy snaps. He pulls out his keys. "Come on, I'm driving you home."

Jackson rolls his eyes, but he doesn't actually argue.

After extracting his address from him and wrestling his bike into the

trunk, Jeremy slides into the driver's seat to find Jackson already in a feverish half sleep beside him, slumped over and breathing heavily.

He leaves the music off and drives in silence apart from his phone's robotic directions, to a cheap little duplex well away from campus. It must've taken Jackson a long time to bike this. Even the bus would be a pain in the ass.

He tries to shake Jackson awake, but he just gets mad and tries to curl harder into the upholstery. It's almost impressive how disagreeable he is even while unconscious.

Resigned, Jeremy digs through the outside pocket of Jackson's backpack, and sure enough there are his apartment keys. He winds up having to half-carry him with one arm and get in the door with the other.

Inside it's cramped, dated, and dark, but also clean and well kept up. He doesn't know which room is Jackson's, so he just sort of pours him onto the living room couch. He considers prying off his shoes, but decides he's already done his moral duty here.

Looking at him, Jeremy is reminded of the early hours of New Years morning, of watching him sleep off the liquor, waiting impatiently for the chance to yell at him. If only he could do things over again. Just pour a tray of ice down his shirt and tell him to get out or he'd call the police.

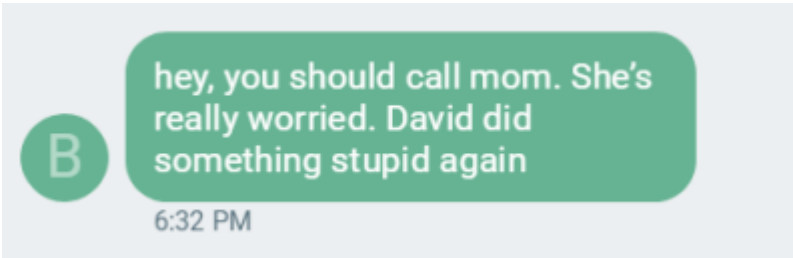
But it's way too late. Now he's caught in a humiliating snare and he has no idea how far things will go.

That does give him an idea, though. He goes back into Jackson's backpack and fishes out his phone. Then he carefully picks up Jackson's limp hand, pries his thumb free, and presses it to the phone to unlock it by fingerprint.

Jeremy's not proud of it, but he needs to know what he's up against here. Does he have incriminating photos? Is he doing this with other guys?

He hasn't gotten far in his investigation when an incoming text startles

the hell out of him. He almost drops the phone. It's from someone named Bethany.



He's still staring at the text, trying to parse it, when the door behind him opens and he instinctively flings the phone to the (thankfully, carpeted) floor.

The guy pausing on the threshold is short and tired-looking. Jackson's roommate, he hopes, because if it's a burglar he has no way of knowing.

He watches the stranger take in the tableau he's just walked in on. Jackson's limp body, his open bag, the way Jeremy's looming over him.

"Um," says Jeremy.

"Hm," says the roommate.

He drives the long way home, blasting the radio and trying to come to terms with how awkward of a person he is and how bad he's going to do on tomorrow's Stats quiz.

Jackson's roommate didn't seem surprised the guy was sick; "I'm surprised it took this long," he actually said, and Jeremy kind of let himself out after that.

Jackson may be ruthless and obnoxious, but if Shannon is the longest relationship he's ever had—and basically the only one he's had with a girl—Jackson is the longest relationship he's had with a guy, just by virtue of hooking up twice. He can't decide which is more depressing, but he supposes it's really the two in conjunction.

He didn't date in high school, but he did fantasize obsessively. He wasn't so different from the other boys he knew really, it was just who he fantasized about. (The other boys he knew.) He started going on

gay apps as soon as he touched down on American soil, and he started screwing American men like it was his job. The guy who took his virginity met him precisely once, and may or may not have realized that was the situation. No one mistakes him for a virgin now. No one knows his full name or who his family is either, not until Jackson, who is using him for money and abusing him verbally, so intimacy really hasn't been the trade up people say it is.

At first it was almost tempting to follow the gay white American Dream he'd seen on TV, come out to everyone in his life, burn bridges with—half of them? All of them? Who cares, maybe. But if he'd expected to feel like he belonged once he went abroad, he was let down. He's a paranoid, uptight foreigner. Sure, he's *come of age* in ways he couldn't under his parents' scrutiny, but in some ways he's more alone than ever.

His dad's going to want a tour of the campus when he visits. The student center, the business school, the library where Jackson Chen gave him a handjob in a restroom like he was some closeted politician cruising for twinks. Actually, that might be a model for masculine success his family could get behind. At least he'd be a politician.

When he finally parks, he can see the lights are on in his place. Shannon's over again.

Jeremy kills the engine and takes deep breaths.

He'd rather drive away than go inside right now, but he doesn't really have anywhere else to go.

Maybe he could develop a drinking problem. Some people go to bars and drink and that's their hobby. He could take that up, easy. Except he'd be driving himself there alone, so then how would he get home?

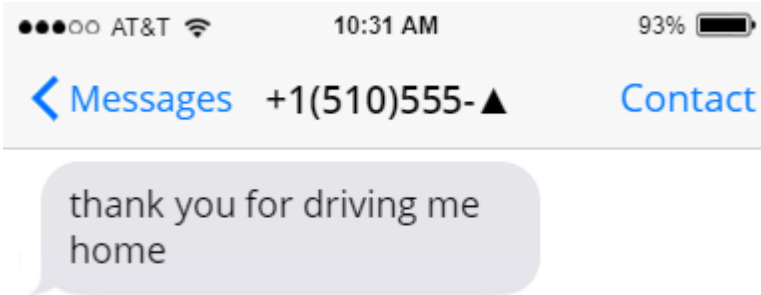
No good. Better just to drive into the sea.

He's steeling himself to go inside and put in a few more hours of pretending to be a good boyfriend (and/or person) when his phone buzzes with a text.

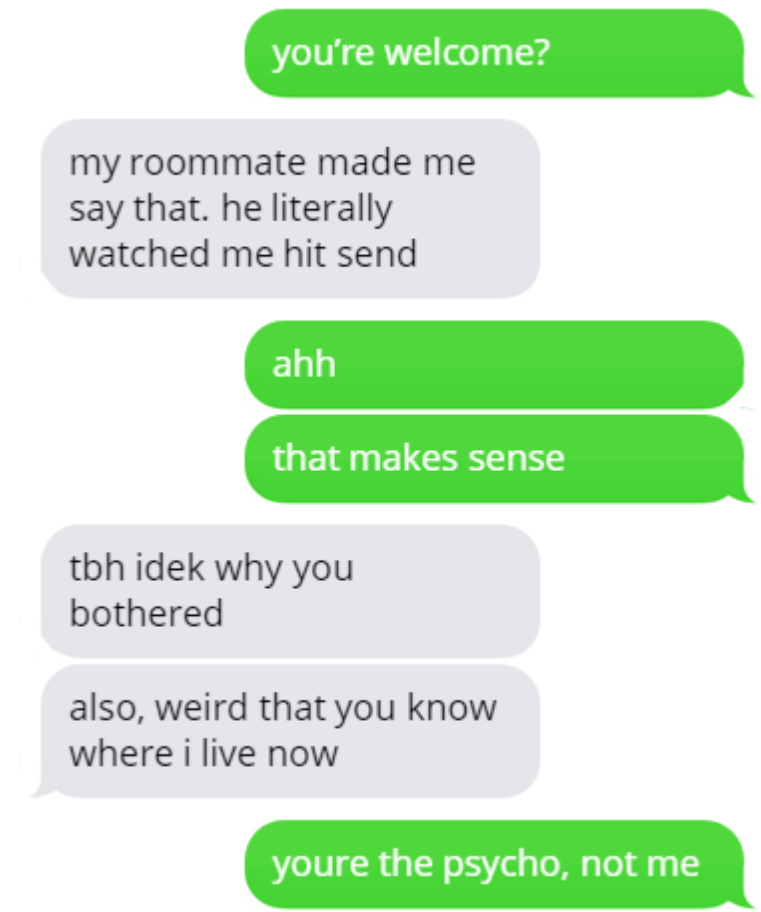
If it's Jackson, he may say something truly crazy. But it's his dad. He wants to know if Shannon eats pork.

"Seriously?" he says out loud. He's on the verge of either laughing or crying and he legitimately can't tell which.

Jackson doesn't text him until late morning.

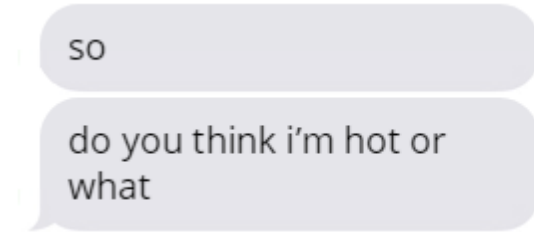


Jeremy stares at the message for a long time. He can't figure out how this could be a trap, so he answers, with caution.


you're welcome?
my roommate made me say that. he literally watched me hit send
ahh
that makes sense
tbh idek why you bothered
also, weird that you know where i live now
youre the psycho, not me

Jackson doesn't immediately respond, so Jeremy moves on and scrolls

Twitter, which never isn't a mistake these days. Half an hour later:



This time Jeremy definitely senses a trap. He doesn't answer.

After that, he doesn't hear from Jackson until a week and a half later, when he shows up on Jeremy's doorstep uninvited, like a true sociopath.

"What if Shannon had been over?" Jeremy demands, torn between keeping him out of his apartment and ushering him out of the public hallway. A few of their classmates live in this building.

Jackson waggles his phone, where he has Instagram open. "She's out of town with Kim and Nancy for the weekend. They're hiking."

Jeremy spoke to them this morning, and refuses to admit that he wouldn't have remembered Kim and Nancy's names at gunpoint. "You can't just come over here," he insists.

"Mm, well, I'm here now," says Jackson, and tries to shoulder past him. Jeremy doesn't budge.

Jackson sighs dramatically. " *Fine* . I'm sexiled."

Jeremy crosses his arms. "Well, what do you normally do when you're sexiled?"

He scowls. "Normally I just put on headphones, but—"

"Dude, I have some Beats, you can just take them."

"—but Kris is hooking up with this grad student, and apparently those are screamers because the headphones don't help, I *will* be taking the Beats though since you offered."

Jeremy frowns as Jackson breezes by him. "Ah."

Jackson takes off the new Nikes that Jeremy bankrolled and tosses them in the corner right by a perfectly good shoe rack, apparently just to be a dick. Then he flings himself onto the couch and starts texting.

He seems… better. The bags under his eyes are still dark, but at least he can stand up straight and focus his eyes. Jeremy would like to be happy for him, but Jackson has never given him reason to.

He wants to slink away and hole up in his room, but he's not comfortable leaving Jackson alone in his apartment. The step from extorting him to straight up stealing his stuff seems lateral at this point.

He sits gingerly on the other side of the couch and pretends to look at his own phone, eyeing Jackson sidelong.

Why is he here? Doesn't he have real friends? Doesn't he have anything better to do than antagonize some guy he doesn't even like in his own home?

They've been sitting there in tense, unhappy silence for fifteen minutes when Jackson sighs, tosses his phone onto the coffee table, and rolls over to straddle Jeremy.

"Oh," says Jeremy.

"I'm bored," says Jackson, grabs him by the hair, and kisses him.

The kisses get harder and deeper until they're making out vigorously, which is better than talking or ignoring each other because at least it feels good in the short term. Jeremy relaxes into it, opening his mouth and coaxing Jackson's tongue even deeper. He likes a dirty kiss; he sucks on Jackson's tongue suggestively until he gets mad and jerks Jeremy's head back roughly by the hair.

Jeremy frowns, annoyed, but changes tack, letting his hands wander over Jackson's tightly wound body. He's strong and skinny. There's not much to hold onto, but he digs his fingers hard into Jackson's ass.

Jackson freezes, and Jeremy prepares for retaliation, but then he melts against him, groaning into his mouth.

Jeremy almost laughs, taken by surprise. He works the muscles under his hands, squeezing and kneading. Jackson's glutes are really tight. He's no sports doctor, but the guy must not be stretching enough when he runs, or something.

He pulls Jackson's joggers and briefs down so his bare ass is exposed, and keeps massaging him. Jackson arches his back into it. “Yeah,” he pants, barely audible, “keep doing that.”

Dirty talk doesn't normally do it for Jeremy, but he knows him, knows the way he normally speaks, and it’s a thrill to hear him ask for something like this.

On a hunch, Jeremy moves one hand lower, pushes his fingers between Jackson’s cheeks until he finds his asshole. Presses down on it gently.

Jackson tenses, almost pulls away, but Jeremy leans back, baring his neck passively and continuing to rub his fingers in firm, soothing circles.

“It’s okay,” he breathes, staring up through his lashes, “I’m just touching."

Jackson half relaxes, still uncertain.

When the doorbell rings, they both jump a foot.

“ *Ow* ,” yelps Jackson, and makes a hasty dismount, which is fair since Jeremy poked him somewhere pretty sensitive. He pulls up his pants while Jeremy runs to wash his hands in the kitchen sink, then pats them dry with a paper towel on the way to the buzzer.

“Pretend you’re not home,” Jackson says incredulously, but Jeremy has a horrible premonition he knows who it is.

Before he can even press the intercom to ask who’s there, there’s a rapping at the front door.

His mouth is dry when he goes to open it.

It’s his dad.

Of course it’s his dad.

“Dad,” he says hoarsely. “Hi. You’re early.”

He’s wearing a nice new suit and there are more grey hairs in his beard than Jeremy remembers. He isn’t supposed to be in California for another day.

“I brought tangerines,” he says, holding up a netted bag. “Surprise.”

He looks past him, and his eyes light on Jackson, standing in the middle of the living room like a deer in headlights. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he says, “am I interrupting?”

Jeremy chokes.

Jackson is red. “Nope,” he says . “Actually, I was just leaving.”

“No, please, stay,” his dad insists. “It would be such a treat to meet one of Jeremy’s American friends.” He comes on inside. In Mandarin, he adds to Jeremy, “I confess I *was* hoping to meet the girlfriend.”

Jeremy realizes right then that Jackson is fluent, because he makes a face of sheer, sadistic delight behind his dad’s back and sits back down on the couch.

As far as Jeremy is concerned they can both go to hell.

He sighs and goes to make them tea.

Jeremy isn’t fooled for a second. It’s about two decades too late for his father to become the kind of fun dad that shows up with surprise gifts. This was an ambush, plain and simple.

“The place is very nice, but it’s cluttered. Have you thought about having somebody come and clean?”

The only clutter Jeremy can see is Jackson’s shoes by the door. He smiles thinly, and turns that smile on Jackson when he coughs to cover a laugh.

“So, Jackson, how long have you been Jeremy’s friend?”

Jeremy shoots Jackson a final, quelling look and answers for him. They are going to end this interview as swiftly as possible. “Just a few months now. We’re in the same statistics class.”

“We actually met through Shannon,” Jackson adds. Jeremy widens his eyes at him murderously, but he just smiles.

His dad chuckles. He’s positively lounging at the table. It’s such a bizarre sight. Pre-retirement must be doing wonders for him.

Even though they’re all speaking English, Jeremy’s dad won’t shut up about how good Jackson’s Chinese is. “Your Mandarin is excellent, are

you sure you grew up in California?”

Jackson laughs and waves him off modestly.

Then he moves on to interrogating Jackson about his major. Jeremy didn’t even know he had a concentration in math, but it explains why he’s so helpful in study group with all those Econ kids. He’s at school on a sports scholarship and pays rent at a part time job, which Jeremy kind of knew, and he has his eye on a few accounting firms after graduation, which he did not know.

“Impressive,” says his dad, for like the fifth time.

Jeremy tries to interject politely. “Dad, let’s let Jackson breathe. You don’t have to ask him all this right now."

His dad just laughs again. “You could learn a thing or two from your friend, Jun Hao.” He nods approvingly at Jackson, who preens. “He’s a hard worker, and he has a solid plan for the future.”

“Thank you for saying so, sir,” says Jackson, with such unerring politeness he sounds like a completely different person. It’s like a fever dream. Jackson Chen, the bane of his last few weeks, basking in the praise of his father, a man who, when Jeremy was five, once called a watercolor of his a ‘pedestrian effort.’

After what is probably about twenty minutes, during which Jeremy has aged twenty years, his dad looks at his watch. “I’m going to go check into my hotel,” he declares, because other people’s schedules mean nothing, but his makes the world go round.

“Great to see you, Dad,” Jeremy lies. “Call me next time!” he adds, forcing a laugh. His dad lifts his hand in a wave, then closes the door behind him.

He buries his face in his hands for however long it takes for him to stop wanting to scream. When he looks up, Jackson is still smiling.

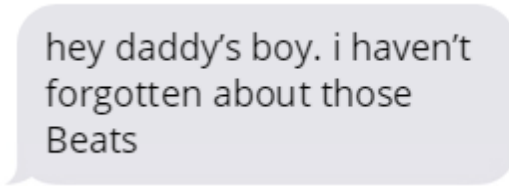
Jeremy looks at him sourly. “What, are you gonna start fucking my dad, too?”

Jackson is shocked for a split, gratifying second, but then a dark glee steals over his face. “Maybe,” he says. “At least then you two would have something in common.”

He helps himself to a tangerine and claps Jeremy’s shoulder on the

way to the door.

That night:



He won't give him the satisfaction of visibly composing a reply, so he opens his Notes and tries out a few.

"Clearly you did because you left without them" lacks bite. "You're the daddy's boy" is confusing, and also weird. "Fuck you" is too easy of a set up.

He sighs and rolls on his back to stare at the ceiling, trying to let the impotent rage roll over him.

Maybe he's been looking at this all wrong. Why should *he* be on the defensive? Jackson's in *his* territory. Jeremy has the money. He enjoys the sex. And for all his bark, he wonders if Jackson is bluffing.

He did it in the bitchiest possible way, but he *did* protect Jeremy from his dad. He has a vested interest in keeping their secret, of course, but somehow Jeremy doesn't think that's why he did it.

A stroke of inspiration has him sitting up in bed.

He opens Grindr, mostly ignoring the new taps and messages but taking note of one semi-serious inquiry—not that he'll act on it, it's just a habit.

He flicks through his carefully curated library of slutty, anonymous selfies until he decides on the one he's been using as his profile pic. There's a reason it's a classic.

He was working out a lot last summer and had a nice tan. It was early in the morning so his stomach was flat and the natural light caught his muscles and the water from his shower. He looks cut and glowing, and his body is cropped right at the jawline and obliques.

He waits. And waits.

Jackson leaves him on read, and Jeremy goes to bed victorious.

The next time Shannon's out of town, this time for a concert, Jeremy doesn't even pretend to be surprised when Jackson shows up on his doorstep.

"Grad student again?" Jeremy offers.

Jackson doesn't blink. "Yup."

They pick up where right where they left off, with Jackson in Jeremy's lap, except this time the door is deadbolted, and Jackson is even pushier, slapping Jeremy's hands away from his ass like he's got something to prove. Straight boys are so pitiful.

Instead, Jackson leans in to suck aggressively at his throat, seconds away from leaving a dark hickey.

That's what it takes for Jeremy to finally snap. He throws Jackson off his lap and onto the cushions, climbs on top of him, and leans in to maul his whole neck, sucking and biting so roughly that some of Jackson's groans are surely of discomfort.

When he pulls away, it looks like someone has earnestly tried to choke Jackson out. Anyone who knows him will definitely believe that before they'll believe a gay affair.

Jeremy grabs Jackson by the chin, forcing him to meet his eyes.

"What did I tell you?" he says slowly, like he's talking to a dog. "No marks."

Jackson's chest is heaving, but he looks just as sullen as ever. He touches his neck, feeling for damage. "Well what the fuck am *I*

supposed to…?"

“You’ll figure it out,” says Jeremy, and kneels on the floor in front of the couch.

They’re exactly where they were New Years morning. If the first time was an accident, this feels wholly premeditated.

Jackson swallows, staring down at him.

Jeremy takes his time unbuttoning him and pulling him out. He works him over lazily, not even looking at what he’s doing. He’s much more interested in Jackson’s face.

“I’ve been thinking,” he says. “I know you’re desperate for money right now, and I know you don’t have enough hours in the day to get what you need."

Jackson squirms, eyes darting away, and Jeremy smiles indulgently.

“So you know what? It’s okay. I can keep buying you stuff, helping you out. It’s no trouble. And I don’t mind this either.”

He speeds up. Jackson whimpers.

“Besides. I think you like getting taken care of.”

When Jeremy finally puts his mouth on him, it’s over almost as soon as it began.

He swallows this time, because he doesn’t want to distract from his point. He stands up so he’s towering over Jackson, who stares at him, winded and wide-eyed.

“So,” says Jeremy, rubbing his hard-on through his jeans, “are you going to return the favor or not?”

Jackson just sits there, fists curled in his lap. Point made, Jeremy moves to walk away—but Jackson reaches out, hooks his fingers through his belt loops, and holds him in place.

“Make me,” he says.

Jeremy inhales.

He pulls out his dick slowly. He’s already heavy and slick. He reaches out to grip Jackson by the back of the neck and hold him still, and

rubs the head over his closed lips until they're shiny.

"You're so cute," he breathes.

Jackson looks pissed and uncertain, color high on his cheeks, but he doesn't look away.

"Now show me how grateful you are."

Jackson opens up.

Chapter 3: Help, Am I A Sugar Baby Now?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jackson takes the Bus of Shame home at 7 AM, in the kind of daze he's previously only associated with overtraining and final exams—his mind and body pushed past their limits to reach a rare, blessed stillness. He's so far beyond tired he's found a second or maybe third wind. He's buzzing.

He queues up a random podcast about black holes and slouches down in his seat, gazing out at all the expensive housing in Jeremy's neighborhood and settling in for the journey.

As he wakes up, the memories from the previous night trickle back to him. He remembers Jeremy yanking on his hair, holding his face still to push into his mouth, then his throat. He would press his head down until he gagged, then let him go to gasp and cough for air and dash the spit and tears from his face. Then he did it again. Over and over, till Jackson's mind was blank and his heart was racing, the whole world narrowed to his next breath.

And he was making these *noises* . Moaning for it, egging him on. It was more satisfying than any roller coaster, more fucked up than any horror movie.

He can feel his skin flushing, but his face doesn't so much as twitch. He keeps watching the buildings and trees. He leans his head against the window, letting his teeth rattle gently in his skull until he's straddling the line between numbness and headache.

By the time he makes it to his stop, the sun is fully up, the bus is full of unfamiliar randos, and he hasn't processed a word of his podcast.

He was hoping Kris would be gone already, but apparently he's working from home today, and has colonized the living room. When Jackson lets himself in, he glances up from his laptop, then does a double-take, peering at him through the glasses he wears around the house.

"Where were you?" he says.

Jackson shrugs off his backpack. "Studying," he says. "Crashed with a

buddy."

Kris pulls a sympathetic face over his coffee. "Lost another round, huh?"

Jackson frowns, distracted. He needs a coffee too. He's gratified to see the French press is still mostly full, and goes over to help himself. When he's poured a cup and still can't figure out what Kris means, he asks, "Lost what round?"

Kris is quiet. When Jackson looks back over, he just makes a vague gesture at his own neck.

Jackson flinches.

He avoided looking in the mirror before he left Jeremy's place, partly because if he had hickies too high to hide, there was nothing he could do about it and he didn't want to find out about them yet.

He tries to stay calm. Kris doesn't know anything. Jackson's on the rebound. It's to be expected he's hooking up. He's not on trial here.

"Lost?" he says, and goes for a flippant grin. "Or won?"

"Lost," Kris confirms solemnly.

Jackson rolls his eyes and heads to his room, trying not to look like he's running away. Once he's in there, he realizes his shirt is inside out.

After that, Jeremy more or less ghosts him.

At first Jackson thinks the ball is in his own court, and refuses to communicate outside of hitting him up for money. He makes a few Venmo requests—$100 here and there with memos like "dick piercing" and "cocaine" when they both know he's using it on peanut butter and, okay, weed—and Jeremy does fulfill them, but not promptly.

When Jackson finally cracks and sends a text ("so how are things"), Jeremy leaves him on read for days before replying ("??? fine").

In class, they make eye contact, they talk once or twice in study group but it's strictly shop. Jeremy is as distant and polite as the first time they met.

Jackson has lost the upper hand.

He feels like a TV homewrecker, chasing a married man for no reason other than 1) money and 2) evil. Jeremy is busy with his normal family and his normal girlfriend, of course he's giving him the brush-off.

He doesn't even like the guy. Free money and zero face time should be ideal. He's just so *restless* .

"Hey, you know Jeremy Huang?" says Kris one evening.

Jackson freezes for a split second, Corona halfway to his mouth, but forces himself to take a casual sip.

"Yeah," he says. "What about him?"

Kris looks underwhelmed. He always does, it's his baseline emotion, but particularly so when Jackson plays dumb like this. He can't help it. It's not like it ever even works, it just buys time.

Here's the thing about Kris:

They met in an English class they were both taking to knock out their American Cultures requirement when Jackson was a freshman and Kris was a senior, and they agreed to live together the year after that when Kris's roommate decided to move to Portland, but they didn't really hang out until the end of that semester when a bunch of people got together for a progressive graduation/going away party.

"So what drove you out of the dorms?" Kris asked him, and Jackson launched into a rant about the white girl two doors down who wouldn't stop blasting Hamilton on repeat. He was medium hammered or he wouldn't have shared his vendetta against Tracy or Adrienne or whatever her name was, who seemed perfectly fine other than being a poli-sci person. But Kris listened to his complaints with grave sympathy until Jackson ran out of steam and drained his glass, embarrassed.

"Next place?" he suggested, wiping his mouth.

"Well, hold on," said Kris, stone cold, and wiggled the Jameson left in his cup. "I'm not throwing away my shot."

Jackson felt the blood drain from his face, and Kris cracked up. It was the first time he'd heard him laugh, and it was surprisingly loud and

genuine.

The point is: Kris usually uses his powers for good, but he has an uncanny ability to zero in on Jackson's discomfort. Jackson may be a consummate bullshitter, but Kris Permadi is unbullshittable.

So when Kris says, "You guys are seeing each other, right?" and Jackson says, " *What* ," as though it's the last thing he expected to hear, it's like, who is he even trying to lie to right now.

"You and Huang. You're fucking," Kris clarifies.

"We are *not* ," he says, which is technically true. Jeremy's super Christian, right? Maybe he doesn't consider it sex at all unless they're married and Jackson has a fertile womb.

"Hmm," says Kris, in that noncommittal way he has. He tips his chair back to reach their mail pile and picks up a small parcel. "What's this then?" he says.

Jackson lunges for it, but Kris is already holding it out of reach, eyebrows raised.

"It's for class," Jackson snaps. He holds out a hand like he expects no resistance, but is still kind of surprised when Kris hands it over. He checks it out: it's an Amazon package, addressed to him, but Jeremy's name is nowhere on it.

"Ha ha," he says.

"What's in it," Kris says innocently. "You're not much of an online shopper."

"None of your business," he snaps.

"You don't know? So you didn't order it."

"Dude, quit being nosy."

Kris just shrugs at him.

Jackson takes the mystery package into his room to open it, which probably doesn't lay any of Kris's suspicions to rest. Good thing he does, though, because—

It's—lingerie.

Like. Black, sheer, lacy, *slutty.* More straps and ribbons than he can follow at a glance, but it's definitely not intended to cover anything up so much as frame it provocatively.

There's a note attached, typed and impersonal: **Thought you'd like something pretty. You've earned it. XXO**

He flings the whole box into the back of his closet and fumes.

Later that night, he's half doing homework and half dozing when the doorbell buzzes and jolts him awake. He's prepared to ignore it until, distantly, he hears Kris swear over the sound of the shower.

"Jackson can you get that!" he yells. "I'll be right out."

He groans, but shouts, "Fine!"

He stomps over to the door in his boxers and yanks it open, still rubbing his eyes.

It's not the grad student from before. This suitor is a dim-looking white boy with big biceps, awkwardly holding a bottle of red wine.

"Hi," he says nervously, "You must be Kris."

Jackson stares at him, then laughs in his face.

"Yo *Kris* !" he shouts over his shoulder. "Your racist boyfriend is here!"

The dude looks mortified, and opens his mouth to say something, but Jackson succumbs to the heavy burden of not giving a fuck, leaves the door open, and walks away.

He flings himself on the sofa with a thing of yogurt and watches darkly as the guy stands frozen like a deer on the threshold.

In under a minute, the water cuts off and Kris rushes out in basketball shorts and a tank top, looking about the maddest Jackson's ever seen him, which is to say his brow is slightly furrowed.

"Holy shit?" he says.

"That package was from my mother, by the way," Jackson says calmly.

Kris visibly gives up. It's majestic. "Cool," he says. He turns away from Jackson to give the guy a sheepish smile and reach for his hand—bold, since they've clearly never met. Unless the guy is even more racist than he thought.

Instead of heading out on the town, Kris pulls the guy by the hand into his bedroom.

Jackson clicks his teeth on his spoon, glowering at the closed door. He can't make out what they're saying, but they're speaking in low voices. Kris sounds apologetic. It's totally beneath him.

He stares at Insta for a while until they start making other noises and he realizes they aren't even bothering to go out first.

He throws his head back and sighs at the ceiling, wondering if he'll need to go find the Beats he coaxed out of Jeremy.

As if right on cue, the annoying goddamn screaming starts again.

Except, wait.

Something in Jackson's brain falls into place like the last tumbler in a lock. He sits up so fast he cricks his neck, staring at the door.

The grad student is gone.

Kris is the screamer.

Jackson hadn't even recognized his voice. He normally speaks in a deadpan, like almost a monotone. Hell, when he wakes up in the morning he's vocal fry in a hoodie. He's expressive, sure, but you have to know what to listen for.

Right now it sounds like he's out of his mind with how good he feels. (Which surely can't be the case.) His voice is coming out high and pleading, almost frantic. Like he can't control or contain it.

Jackson used to make Shannon wail like that. It was hot. It made him feel in control, even though he *definitely* wasn't, never with her.

Slowly, he slides his hand into his briefs.

He's deprived, he tries to convince himself.

He was getting laid regularly with Shannon—and Zoey and Christine back to high school—but now it's just in weird sporadic ambushes

with Jeremy, so a dry spell like this is new for him. He can't be hearing people get… *satisfied* in the next room, not without wanting some of what they're having.

He goes in his room and locks the door.

He tries thinking about nothing. Straight things. Shannon, which bums him out, so no, so... hot women in general. Those girls on Riverdale.

But Jackson has a head for patterns. He's a mathematician, after all. His thoughts always connect in ways he wish they wouldn't. For example: he hasn't been able to help noticing that the stuff he used to get off on doing to Shannon—grabbing her wrists, pushing her into the mattress, kissing her super aggressively—it's all the exact stuff he gets off on Jeremy doing to him.

He wonders what's happening to Kris to get those noises out of him. He seems to really, really enjoy it. (Unless he's faking. Wait. Was Shannon faking? Okay, now's not the time.) If that's how he really feels he's probably going to sleep like the dead tonight. Jackson is jealous—he's always trying not to think, but it never seems to work.

He wonders if Jeremy really wants to do anal like he keeps hinting, or if he's just trying to fuck *with* him.

Maybe he needs a therapist, Jackson thinks after he comes. He knows they can only do so much, but like. Still.

He leaves home early the next morning so he doesn't have to look Kris in the eyes.

Jackson is in rare form at the next study group. The last few days have lit a fire of vengeance in him. Someone has to pay, and justice demands that it be Jeremy.

He got to the library early, went to the hookup bathroom—just to be sentimental—and took a bunch of suggestive selfies with his shirt pulled up and his jeans pulled down. It wasn't too different from the pictures he used to take for Shannon, but the little scraps of lace did call for more strategy in terms of framing and angle. He has a new respect for how effortless hers always looked.

Other people are presenting the material today, as an experiment with peer tutoring. It's also because they feel bad about Jackson's meltdown the other day, which is regrettable, but in this case his laziness wins out over his pride. He has basically achieved the American Dream and is getting paid to sit on his ass.

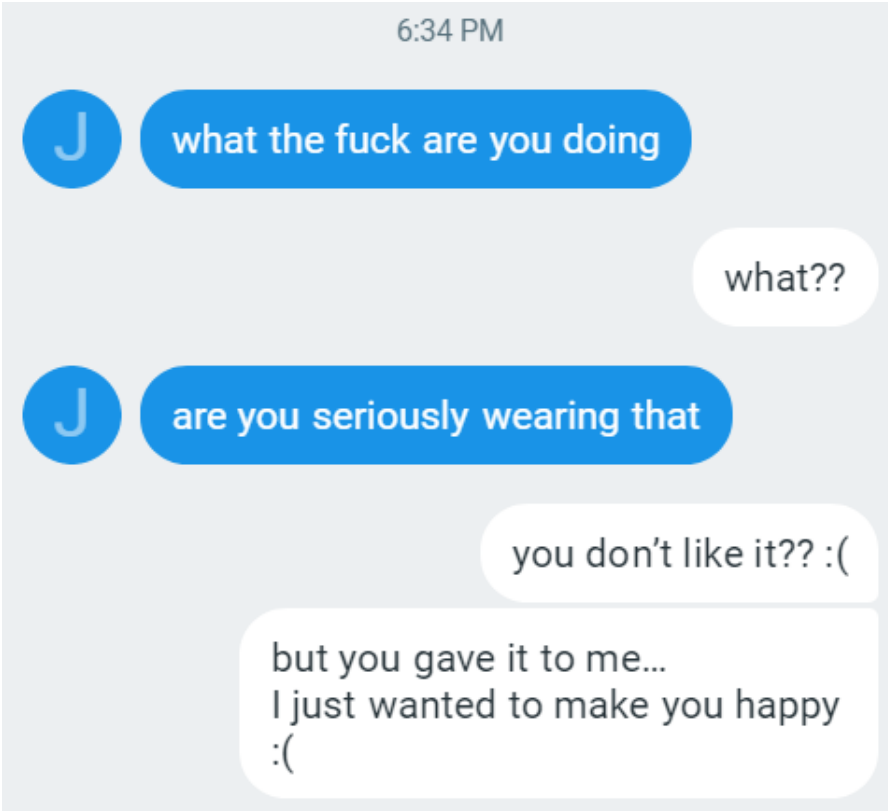
...And sexually harass people.

He's had a wedgie for hours and is losing sight of why he was doing this, so it's important that he nut up and execute his plan.

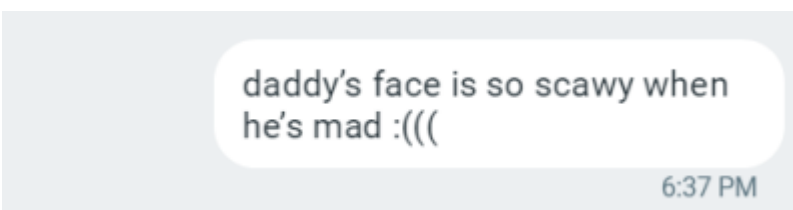
Under the table, his face turned towards the presenter and his eyes only occasionally flicking down, he picks out three of the best selfies, texts them to Jeremy all at once, and sits back to watch the show.

Jeremy more or less understands the material, so he notices the texts right away just as Jackson predicted. He thumbs open his phone to glance at it as soon as it's not horribly rude to do so. Jackson bites the inside of his cheek and tries to keep a straight face. He watches the blood drain from Jeremy's face, then rush back up his neck and ears as he slams his phone facedown on his lap.

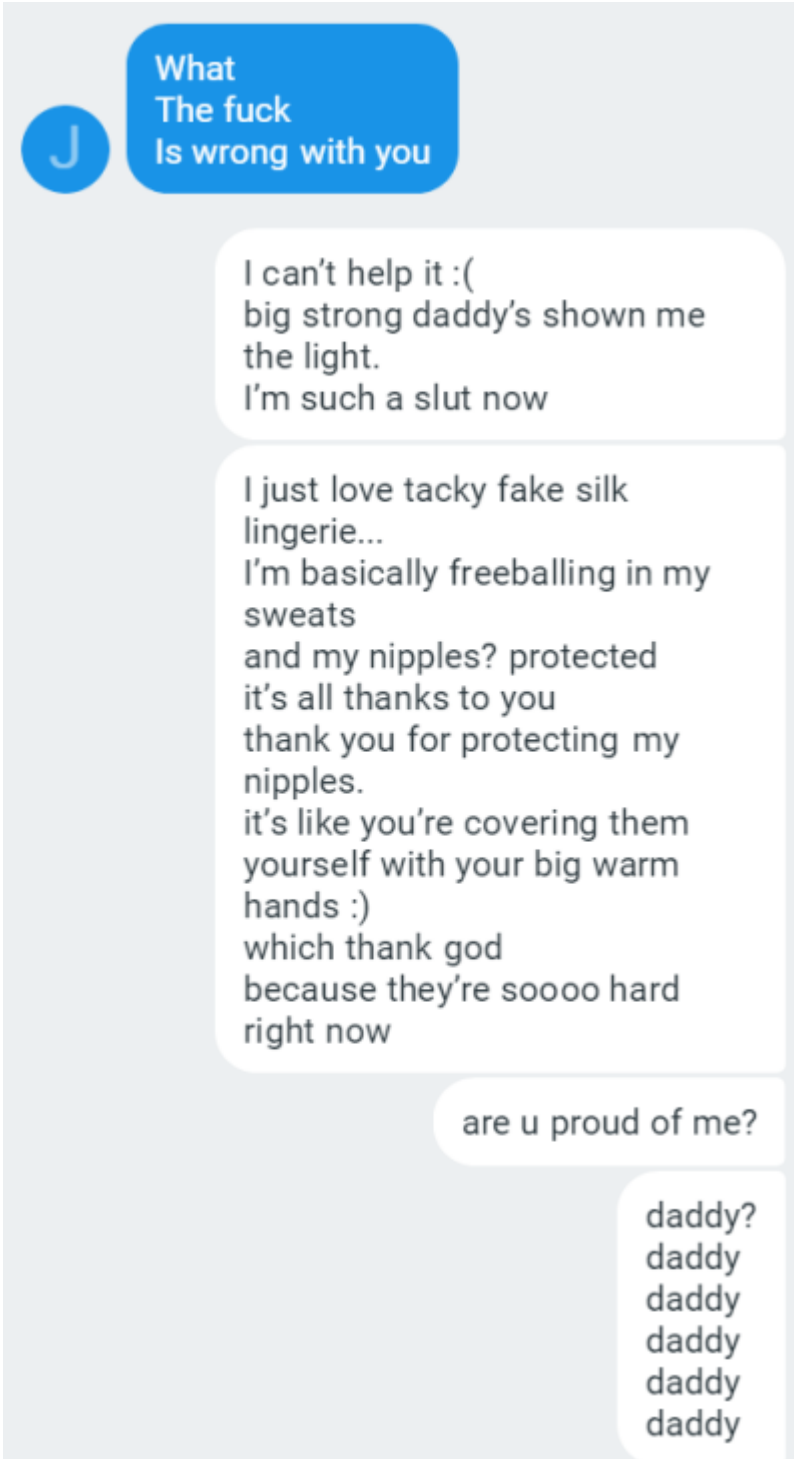
He watches Jeremy type furiously under the table until his own phone pulses.



Jeremy finally looks up at him, and without breaking eye contact, Jackson types:

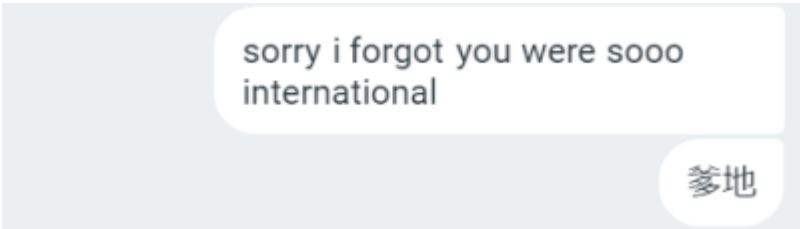


Jeremy stares at him in disbelief.



Jeremy puts his phone face down on the table with trembling fingers. He pushes it away pointedly.

Jackson's so close to cracking up, but that would give the game away. He holds up a few fingers, subtly: *truce* . He starts typing again, then puts his own phone down. He nods at Jeremy's. Jeremy, seemingly at war with himself, looks down at his screen again and immediately widens his eyes in rage.



Jeremy looks like he's seconds from closing the distance between them and bashing his head in with their statistics textbook. But instead—and Jackson is kind of impressed, actually—he takes a deep breath, puts his phone in his bag, and zips it away.

Fine, then. Jackson settles back into his chair and ignores the presenters entirely, tapping away at his screen, drawing inspiration from every godawful titty anime he's watched to perfect his erotic novel/manifesto. Jeremy will surely appreciate it later after it's marinated.

As soon as the session is over, Jeremy books it out the door. Jackson has to power walk to avoid losing him. He catches up in the parking lot, jogging to grab his sleeve before he can unlock his car.

"Hey," he says.

When Jeremy turns around, his face thunderous, Jackson doesn't know what to do with his own face. It feels frozen in a half smile, half sneeze.

"So…." he begins, but he can't keep the laugh out of his voice for even one word.

Jeremy fucking *shoves* him, and Jackson cackles aloud. He's such a toddler.

"I just wanted to say thank you for the present," he manages, before Jeremy grabs him by the arms and slams him against the side of the

car so hard Jackson is briefly winded.

“Shut *up* ,” he snarls.

Jackson can’t catch his breath. “Make me,” he grins.

So they hook up in the car.

It’s… well, it’s stupid. And uncomfortable. A seatbelt buckle’s poking him in the small of his back and his head is pressed against the window in a very unsustainable way.

It’s late enough that most of the other students have trickled off campus. There’s only a handful of other cars in this parking lot and Jackson wonders if campus security will come knocking. Thankfully the windows are tinted, which, now that he thinks about it, why *does* he have tinted windows? But he pushes that out of his mind as Jeremy straddles him in the backseat and lifts his shirt over his chest.

Jackson laughs in surprise as Jeremy slips his fingers under the bra.

“You really have a fetish, huh.”

Jeremy doesn’t answer, just thumbs a nipple. Jackson shivers. No conversation, huh? If Jeremy wants to get this over with as fast as possible, fine. With some difficulty, Jackson shimmies out of his joggers while Jeremy shifts to try to arrange their legs in a way that lets him grind against his ass. He’s already hard, unzipping his fly and pulling himself out.

The lingerie barely does its job (or does its job perfectly?) because when Jeremy drags the tip of his cock against his asshole, there's basically nothing between them. His chest tightens with anxiety. Jeremy probably feels him clench, and definitely feels all his limbs lock up.

“Don’t worry,” Jeremy murmurs in his ear. “I’m not gonna put it in.”

Something curdles in Jackson’s stomach. He hates when Jeremy speaks to him gently. He feels patronized. In retaliation, he slides his hand up Jeremy’s shirt, slow and seductive. The poor sap breaks out in goosebumps. Jackson smiles up at him, then grabs his nipple and twists it, hard.

Jeremy yowls, a gratifyingly undignified sound, and slaps Jackson’s hand away. Incandescent with rage, he grabs Jackson’s shirt like a gangster threatening someone in a movie, only horizontally and without credibility. “ *Don’t* do that again,” he snarls. He’s so mad he doesn’t know what to do with himself. It makes Jackson feel all warm inside.

He tilts his hips upwards. “I’m sorry,” he says, looking up through his lashes, channeling every obnoxiously slutty move any girl has ever used on him.

Jeremy is staring at his face in disgust and wonder. “God. Oh my god. You’re… the worst.”

“Mm,” he says, biting his lips, “tell me more.”

Jeremy covers his mouth.

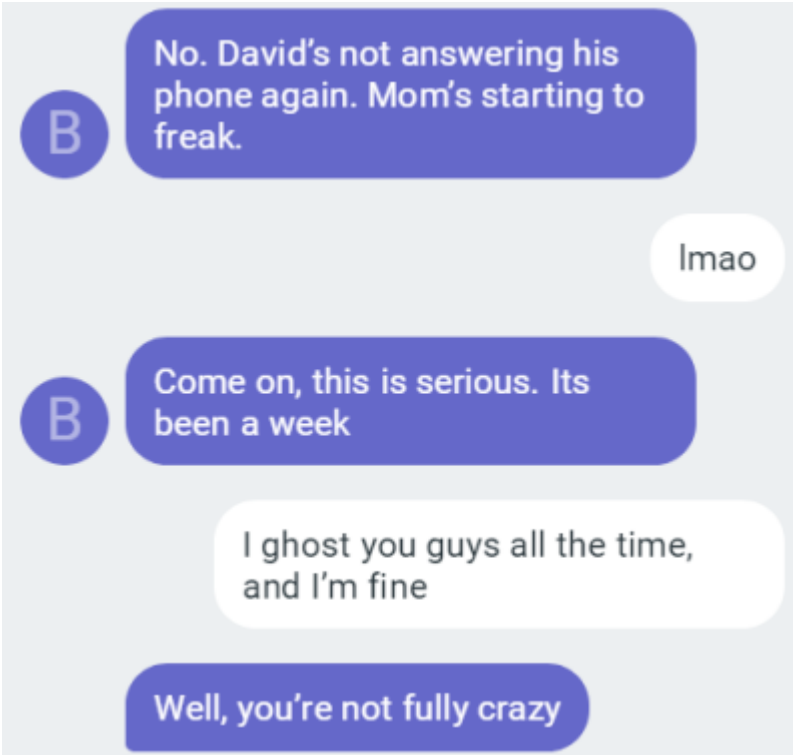
After, Jeremy gives him a ride home.

“Sweet dreams,” Jackson tells him, and cackles when Jeremy just turns red and pulls out of the driveway.

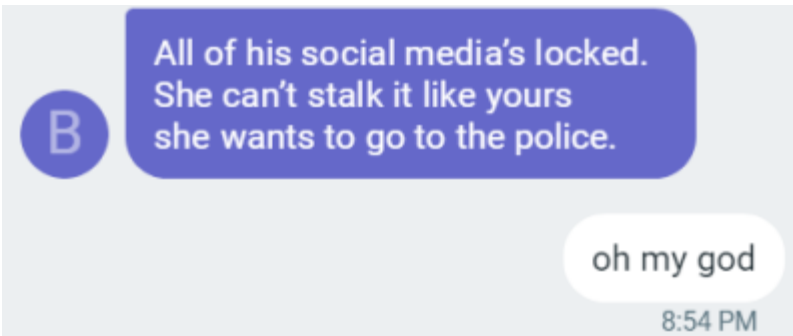
Whistling the contented tune of someone who’s just gotten off *and* won a fight, he lets himself inside. Tosses his keys on the counter, pulls out his phone, and checks it to find—his stomach drops. Six voicemails from his mom.

Rather than listen to them, he texts Bethany about it. It’ll be quicker, one way or another.

She replies right away, like she's been waiting. It's not reassuring.

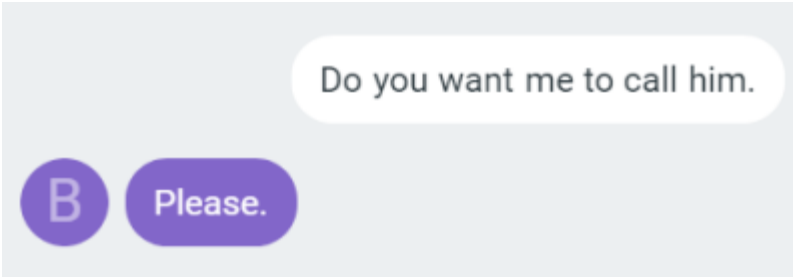

B
No. David's not answering his phone again. Mom's starting to freak.
lmao
B
Come on, this is serious. Its been a week
I ghost you guys all the time, and I'm fine
Well, you're not fully crazy

Debatable, but okay.



He knows his mom is just being ridiculous, but Jackson opens Twitter and looks up their brother's locked account. It's been a few days since he posted (about In-N-Out, proving that being an unstable fuckup does

not make you interesting), but that's nothing unusual.



He's pretty sure his number's the only one David doesn't block when he's in these moods.

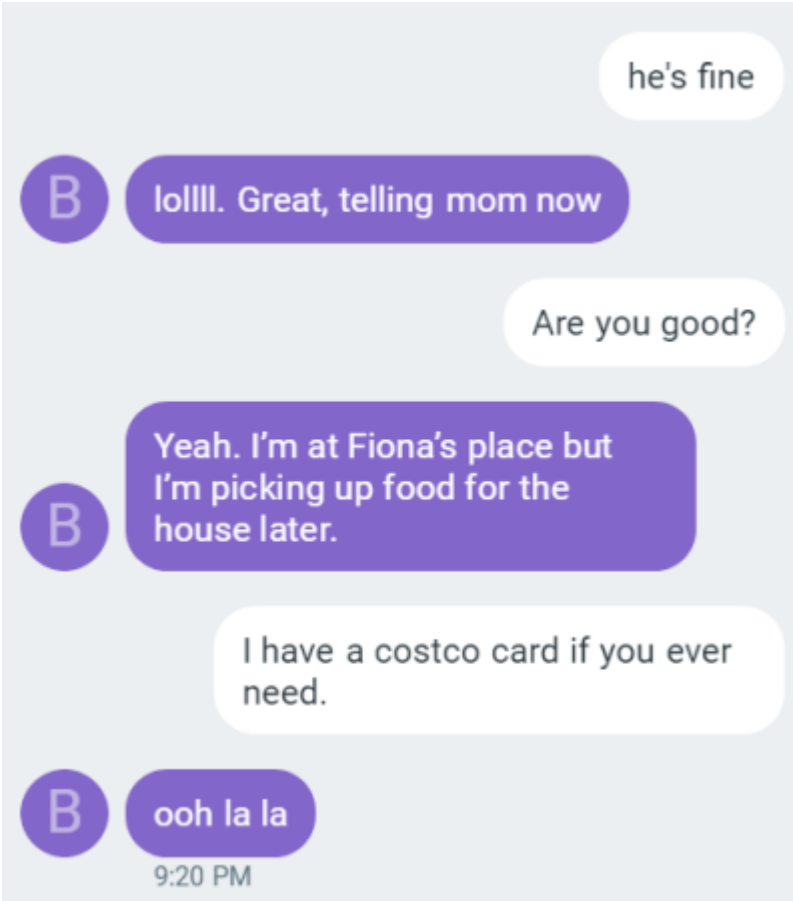
David's voicemail message is the default robot voice. Jackson stays calm. It's not like a normal person will answer their phone either.

He sighs and runs his hand through his hair. "Hey man, can you just like text me a thumbs up or something? We don't have to get into anything, just let us know you're breathing."

Then he finishes going inside and taking off his shoes. Bullshit that he could've been comfortable this whole time.

Ten minutes later, David texts him a middle finger emoji. Close enough.

Jackson deflates on the couch, annoyed with himself for getting worked up to begin with. He sends Bethany a screenshot.


he's fine
B
lolllll. Great, telling mom now
Are you good?
B
Yeah. I'm at Fiona's place but I'm picking up food for the house later.
I have a costco card if you ever need.
B
ooh la la
9:20 PM

He's in the red now, so he can't afford to drink anything good. It's back to the banana flavored embalming fluid for tonight, sending him off to sleep before Kris can get back from his job or his orgy or whatever it is he does.

He's in a foul mood for the rest of the week, and finds himself creeping on Shannon's social media just to see when she's leaving town next. Fucking around with Jeremy is the only thing that can distract him lately, so he's getting lowkey obsessed with it.

The next chance he gets (she's going to Vancouver because her cousin has a thing there and she's always wanted to visit Canada), he calls in sick to work, packs a box of Cliff Bars and a vape pen Jeremy doesn't know he bankrolled, and catches the first bus of the day to Jeremy's

place.

The sun is barely up but Jeremy answers the door already showered and ready to go. He lets him inside with an air of resignation.

Jackson smokes him up. He doesn't ask if Jeremy has tried weed before and Jeremy doesn't volunteer the information. They've shared enough vices already, so it's truly whatever. But either way, it's fascinating to watch his handsome, stressed features go soft and vague. This time when they kiss, he leans into Jackson's hands and mouth like he's desperate for the touch.

For the first time, they use Jeremy's actual bed, which is so huge Jackson can't help picturing all the weird positions he and Shannon have tried out on it, even as Jeremy presses him into the mattress.

He's here to go all the way and they both know it. They only stop kissing to undress each other.

It's insane, but he's never seen Jeremy naked before. He has a sculpted, designer-looking body. Jackson feels like a starved rat in comparison, but it doesn't even matter when Jeremy is staring at him with that hungry look in his eyes. He licks Jackson's skin greedily, scraping his teeth down his stomach and sucking hickeys into his hips, neglecting his dick entirely till it's hard and leaking.

He has lube in his bedside drawer. Jackson can see he has condoms too, but Jeremy doesn't get them out and Jackson doesn't ask. Not like he has to worry about getting knocked up with a Huang scandal-bastard anyway.

The lube is cold and, obviously, slippery. Jeremy fingers him shallowly for a few minutes, getting him used to the sensation.

"It's okay," Jeremy whispers into his mouth, and Jackson rolls his eyes as he tries to let go of whatever tension has him so concerned.

It definitely feels weird, but Jackson is beginning to understand all the hype.

"Wanna… try?" Jeremy asks him, awkwardly. It's not like Jackson wants to spell any of this out either, so he just nods and lets Jeremy arrange him ass-up on the mattress.

The head of his dick is, again, obviously, a lot thicker than a finger.

Jackson did some Googling earlier on the technical details of this whole operation, but now, in the heat of the moment, all he can seem to recall is the word *sphincter* .

“Push,” Jeremy instructs him.

“What?” Jackson snaps. “That doesn’t make sense.”

Jeremy groans and shakes Jackson by the shoulder. “Oh my *God* , will you just—!”

“Jesus, okay!” says Jackson, slapping his hands away.

He pushes back like he’s literally trying to shit a brick. Jeremy was right—he slips in further, so suddenly that Jackson hisses, more in surprise than anything. Like it doesn’t *hurt* , per se, but…. ”Can you put more lube,” he suggests through clenched teeth.

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” says Jeremy. Jackson feels a cold drizzle smooth the way, and the overall burning eases considerably.

He takes deep breaths, trying to relax. Jeremy is bigger than him, stronger, and bearing down steadily. His voice is tense but controlled, and no louder than necessary when he speaks directly into Jackson’s ear: “I’m almost in, okay?”

“ *Almost?* ”

“Can you take it?”

What a bitch. He tries to laugh but it comes out pathetic and small.

Anyway, the answer is no. He can’t take it. He doesn’t like how weirdly full it feels, or the involuntary grunting sounds it’s pushing out of him, or the disturbingly toilet-adjacent sensations it evokes. He doesn’t like it until for a strange, crystalized moment he *does,* and then right away it’s too much entirely.

They’re both sweating already. The back of his thighs stick to Jeremy’s every time he pushes in. It’s gross.

This is so gross.

Why did he want to do this again? If it hadn’t been for *Kris*—

Jeremy pulls out and rolls him over so that they’re facing each other, and adds another generous dollop of lube. This time when he pushes

in, it's a little easier, and Jackson almost welcomes it. But he bites the inside of his cheek and looks away—he doesn't want to be seen like this. He doesn't know how Kris can handle it.

He tries to press his face up into the crook of Jeremy's neck, but Jeremy leans away and looks down at him with concern. "Hey," he says softly. And Jackson knows what he'll say, that he'll suggest they stop.

Fuck him. Fuck Jeremy and his guilty faux-sympathy. He's no less of a hypocrite than Jackson is.

"Keep going," he says, before Jeremy can finish the thought. He hopes he sounds tough but knows he doesn't. Jeremy gives him another appraising look, then grabs Jackson's legs by the back of the knees and bends his legs to his chest. One more squirt of lube for luck, and he starts fucking him for real.

This is different. It's intense. Jeremy meets his eyes and sets a brisk pace, knocking Jackson around like a boat in a storm. He rides it out, grabbing at Jeremy's arms to mitigate the jostling, focusing on the breath getting punched out of him with every thrust, on the feeling of being pinned and helpless, on the pounding of his heart that slowly overtakes any coherent thought.

Jeremy comes with a loud growl, right in his ear, then collapses on top of him, crushing what's left of Jackson's breath out of his lungs.

They lie there limp with exhaustion for a minute, chests heaving, skin sticky. Jackson feels wretchedly, blissfully blank.

Jeremy extracts himself and rolls away. Jackson drifts in and out of consciousness before Jeremy comes back and cleans them both up with a damp towel, which helps wake him up a little. He still hasn't come, so Jeremy nudges his legs apart and administers a brutally efficient handjob, wringing him out completely until he's too tender to stand being touched.

After, while Jeremy's in the shower, Jackson sits on the edge of his bed and wills away a panic attack. It takes a few minutes, but once he has his body back under control, he collects his stuff and lets himself out.

He goes home feeling sore and hollowed out. He's pretty sure there's still come inside of him and he's going to have to deal with that eventually.

He was looking forward to Kris distracting him, but he comes home to

a dark apartment and remembers too late that he's at some godforsaken tech bro work party.

He lies down on the couch with his shoes still on, and updates his phone for lack of literally anything better to do. Apparently he has 114 unread messages on Line, which has to be some kind of personal record. He hasn't looked at it in months, since he'd only used it for track team stuff and shitposting.

He speed-scrolls to catch up with the gist: he wasn't the only one who'd had a breakup, and someone's cousin was running for office, and someone's sister got married. There's also—especially back around the time of his surgery—a flood of well wishes, words of support, and stupid memes, all directed at him, all to cheer him up and make him feel less alone. He didn't see a word of it at the time.

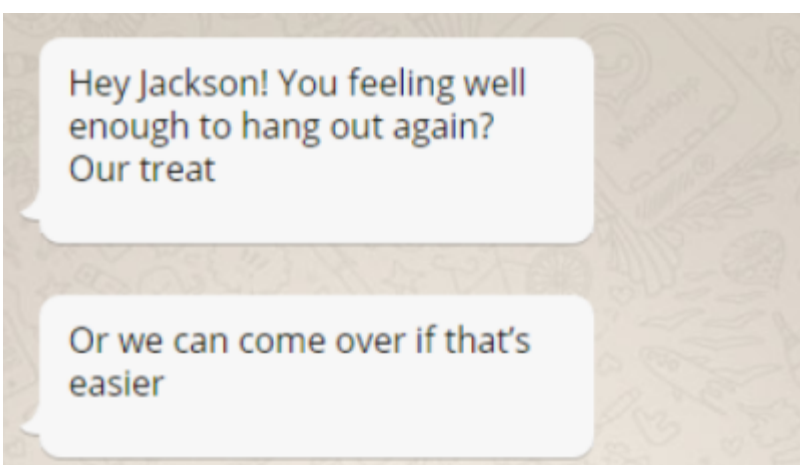
Jackson's throat tightens.

Would it have helped him, seeing these? Would he have felt less alone? Or would the alienation have gotten to him even faster somehow?

He has no way of knowing. He doesn't have normal reactions to things, that's one thing the injury and its aftermath have made very clear.

There are dozens of DMs too, offering him help, inviting him to stuff.

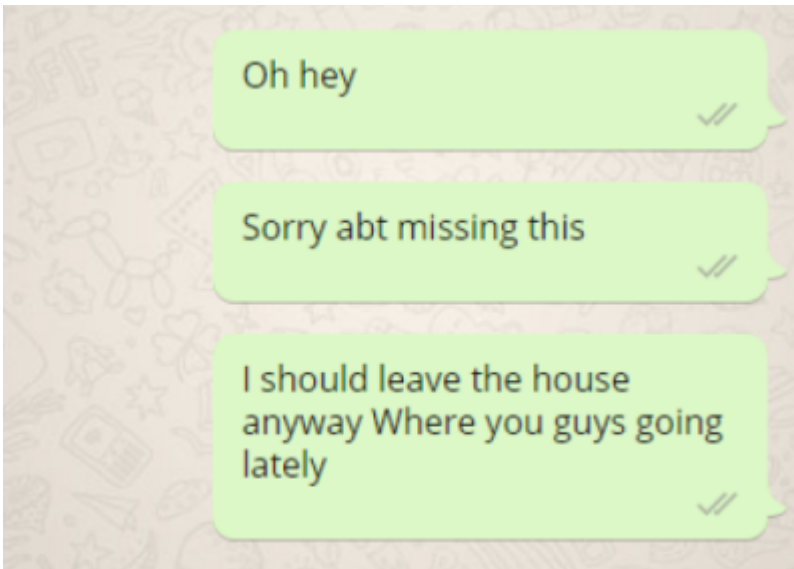
He scrolls to the most recent message, which is from Other Asian Jackson, only a week or so ago:



Treat, huh?

Last year he would've jumped at the chance to party on his buddies' dime. Today, he wonders if they just pity him.

He gathers up all his pride and swallows it whole.



As soon as he sends the message, he shoves his phone deep into his backpack. He'll check for responses in the morning. Probably.

There's a party on a Friday night at a bar off campus and the guys want him to come catch up.

Amal gives him a big hug. White Chris buys him a beer. By all accounts, he's welcome, but it's still hard not to feel like he's forcing his presence on them. The dynamic has changed since he stopped going to practice. People are surprised to see him here. They feel sorry for him. He can feel their eyes linger on his haggard face and his out of condition body.

Then Shannon and Jeremy roll up.

Fuck. Of course. Kim is dating Jessica from women's track now, so Shannon would be showing up at these functions. He curses Other Asian Jackson for not thinking of that before inviting him. Then he curses himself for expecting other people to look out for him. This is on him. He's an idiot for not thinking of it.

When Shannon sees him, she looks startled, but smiles and waves

gamely. Jackson thinks he may actually vomit, and wonders if he should start acting drunk now so it won't seem weird.

His eyes dart involuntarily to Jeremy's face, hoping to find some fellow feeling of discomfort, or better yet, shame and panic. Instead, Jeremy is laughing and chatting, working the room, ignoring him entirely. It makes Jackson feel like he imagined getting fucked by him, or even meeting him.

He wonders if Jeremy's secretly getting off on ignoring him, if he's sneaking glances to gloat at the misery bleeding through on his face.

Shannon has no idea what the two of them are doing behind her back. He's no better than she is. He's worse.

He excuses himself to use the bathroom, and just fucking leaves.

When he gets back to his place, Kris is actually there already, lying on the couch playing Overwatch, looking homey and comfortable. "Hey," he says, glancing up from his game with a warm little smile.

He doesn't know what kind of face he's making, but Kris takes one look at him, exits the match, and stands up.

"So I'm getting us pizza," he says calmly. "My treat. What do you want?"

Jackson must be nearing the end of his rope because he's so fucking moved he could cry. Impulsively, he drags his feet over to where Kris is standing and drapes his arms around his shoulders. He feels warm and solid, and if he stiffened in surprise at first, he relaxes into the hug, even rubbing his back a little.

"Pineapple and pepperoni," says Jackson tragically into Kris's neck. "Thank you."

Kris pats his arm awkwardly with one hand while he fishes his phone out of his pocket with the other. Jackson doesn't move. He can't force himself to let go and step away, not from the first shred of human kindness he's encountered all week.

"You're so nice to me," he says, and it doesn't come out as extra as he was trying for—it sounds, to his chagrin, almost sincere.

Kris clears his throat. “Thanks, Jackson. Have you been drinking?”

It really does feel that way. “I wish,” he says instead, and winces. Too honest again.

Kris pulls back and frowns at him. It’s not a self-absorbed guilt thing, he just likes him and can tell something is wrong. It’s pure and uncomplicated and it makes Jackson feel like he’s starving.

He holds onto Kris and doesn’t let him move any farther away.

“Jac—” he begins, but Jackson takes his stoic face in his hands and tips it back a little. He always forgets, but Kris is kinda short. Kris meets his gaze squarely, never one to back down. But his eyes are wide and nervous, and his ears are bright red.

Fuck it.

Jackson leans in and kisses him.

Chapter End Notes

Translator's Note

爹地 - "daddy"

Chapter 4: Help, My Roommate is Dragging Me Into His Sex Life

Kris's crush on Jackson Chen has been germinating for years against his better judgment.

As a freshman, Jackson was a skinny little nerd, but late puberty and sports training were very generous to him, and he came back from that first summer break looking like an ad for Crossfit. Everyone noticed, including Shannon, who had the good sense to lock him down right away.

So yes, he got hot, but so do all those runner guys eventually. Kris still remembers the night he really took notice.

He was done with school and had just gotten out of a semi-serious relationship. He should probably not have been partying on campus, but he'd had some kind of point to prove. He was trying to experiment with his look, and that night he went with a black leather jacket and dark red lipstick. It had seemed like a good idea at home, a sort of sultry goth thing, surely the natural progression for any quiet, kinda-cute gamer. But in the harsh light of Zach Kaminski's living room, it was a total failure. He felt so self-conscious he was standing around alone, propped against the wall with his shoulders hunched, a drink in one hand and his phone in the other. He'd also severely overestimated how many people he would know here.

In fact, the first person he recognized was the guy who'd just dumped him, which was pretty fucking uncool. He approached Kris as soon as their eyes met, which was also less than ideal.

"What are you doing here?" Brian asked him. Not in an excited way.

"What do you mean? We're both graduated." Kris's voice was gravelly. He cleared his throat. "What are *you* doing here?"

"You don't own Zach's house. I've known him longer."

Kris took a breath and tried to let the hostility roll off of him. His voice was calm when he said, "Okay. So go bother Zach."

But Brian wasn't here to make nice. He was here to like defend his

territory or something. “Dude, are you wearing lipstick? Don’t you think that’s a little...?" He made a vague limp wrist gesture, and Kris stiffened like he'd been tased.

Shock competed with hurt and anger. All he could think to say was, “Seriously?”

Brian rolled his eyes like Kris was being too sensitive, which was in fact the reason he’d given for wanting to break up.

Kris was frozen, doing social calculus at light speed, trying to figure out any kind of winning move, when a heavy arm dropped around his shoulders. It was Jackson Chen, with his butch little track buzzcut and his insufferable bro tanktop and a shiteating grin on his shitfaced face.

“Hey,” he said way too loudly in Kris’s ear, leaning on him way too hard. He tried to pour some of his drink into Kris’s cup, but spilled about half of it on his fingers instead. “This guy bothering you?”

Kris shook the liquor off his hand, bewildered. “What?” he said.

“Oh, it’s Steve!” Jackson showed Brian his teeth. "Good to see you, man. Can I borrow Kris? We were having a super good conversation the other day. About… video games.” And he stared him down, raising both eyebrows like a Halloween mask, until Brian took a step back.

“What the fuck—”

“Oh sweet, well, enjoy the party.” And he turned away to face Kris and clack their Solo cups together. “Cheers. Cheerses."

Kris was too confused to do anything but take a sip. It tasted like a double Screwdriver, and was gross.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Brian throw up his hands and stalk out of the room.

Jackson had turned his glassy, intent stare on Kris, so he took another sip. He nodded and relaxed, apparently satisfied with his own hospitality.

Kris swallowed—gross. “Hi Jackson.”

Jackson nodded agreeably. “Sup.”

“You do know that was my ex, right?” Just to make sure. It wasn’t easy to predict what would make a straight guy uncomfortable.

“Yeah of course!" said Jackson, and knocked the rest of his own drink back in one swallow. "Good old... Tyler.”

Kris knew for a fact that the two of them had met many times, and Jackson was very good with names. He smiled into his cup.

“Well, thanks.”

Jackson waved his hand and made a dismissive sputtering sound like a dying engine. “That dude’s a dick. One time I saw him playing Ultimate with his shirt off in like, 60 degree weather. You can definitely do better.”

Kris choked on a startled, genuine laugh.

Jackson paused and gave Kris a drunken once-over, appearing to notice his outfit for the first time. He declared: “ *That* is a dope look.”

It was all kind of downhill from there.

And now they're kissing.

Jackson came home upset about something, Kris offered him food, and apparently he should've tried that years ago, because that was all it took for Jackson to fall into his arms.

He's too shocked to move for a minute. Jackson's hands are holding his head in place, his lips pressing against Kris's gently but firmly, his body so close he can feel its heat. Kris lays a hand against Jackson's chest, but doesn't push him away, so the gesture is pretty ambiguous. Even he isn't sure what he means by it.

He should probably stop this, but he's only a man. Is Jackson's heart pounding?

As soon as Kris moves his own lips, Jackson takes a deep breath through his nose and lunges forward to deepen it, crowding him against the couch until they're both forced to sink down to the cushions.

He's a good kisser. He's just as intense as Kris had idly speculated he might be.

When Jackson finally pulls away, Kris stares at him, searching his eyes. He doesn't look drunk, and he doesn't… doesn't taste drunk, either. Jesus.

He feels like he's at the beginning of a weirdly stressful wet dream.

"This is a bad idea," Kris whispers.

Jackson is still close enough to count his pores. He licks his lips, which is totally unfair, and gives him an unconvincing grin. "It's fun though, right?"

Kris leans away a little more. "Jackson… is everything okay?"

He doesn't know what the hysterical bark of laughter is supposed to mean, other than a clear No.

Kris takes a breath to, in a move he never would've predicted, tactfully decline Jackson Chen's advances. But as soon as he does, Jackson jumps off the couch and straightens his clothes briskly. "Forget it," he declares.

The five minutes since he walked in the door have been a real roller-coaster.

“Okay,” says Kris weakly. “Do you… still want pizza?”

“Yup,” says Jackson, and hurries away into his room, slamming the door.

When the pizza arrives, Kris leaves the box on the table, takes two slices, and retreats to his own room to try and process whatever the fuck just happened.

He spends the next day at work extremely distracted.

Jackson has always been a handful, has always had a volatile personality. He has a hard-bitten sense of humor and a sharp intellect that Kris doubts he even sees in himself, and yet, at the same time, he’s also a stupid, stupid, immature manlet.

He’s a perfectly good person to live with, but a deeply confusing person to be friends with.

Here’s what Kris knows: Jackson’s having some sort of illicit affair with the guy Shannon dumped him for, which is obviously pretty psychologically complex even if the whole thing weren’t exacerbated by gay panic, which it clearly is.

And sure, maybe Kris has been nosy. He needled him until he copped to the affair, or at least kind of did. And sure, he’s been petty too. He’s lived in a dorm before, it’s not like he doesn’t know how to fuck quetly—it’s just that lately he’s chosen not to. Whether to annoy Jackson or turn him on or make him jealous, it didn’t super matter.

Maybe he’d been mad that Jackson had chosen to take his sexual experimentation to someone else. But now that his Jeremy rebound has him double-rebounding onto Kris… well, that’s worse, probably.

He thinks he did his best to shut it down, but something about the sullen look in Jackson’s eyes last night makes him worry he was going to take his rejection as a challenge.

Or hope.

He shouldn’t hope for that.

Okay, this has to stop. He has to be the adult here, because god knows

Jackson isn't going to. He has a magnetic, addictive personality, a heavy gravitational well of drama, and Kris can feel himself falling in unless he works not to.

He's fond of the guy. He's sympathetic to his problems—the ones he's allowed to know about, anyway. He can be supportive, but he has to have boundaries. He can't fix someone so determined to sabotage his own life, but he *can* refuse to participate.

As he's giving himself this pep talk, something hits him on the cheek, startling him a foot and a half across the carpet on his rolling chair. It's a balled-up sticky note, flicked from across the shared desk by David, his work frenemy, who is a little like if Jackson wasn't hot or charismatic. Kris hates him very much.

"Quit daydreaming, dude. You need more coffee or something?"

"Fuck you," Kris tells him cheerfully.

He doesn't know exactly what he expects to come home to that night, but a high motorized buzzing is what greets him when he walks in the door.

He drops his bag on the floor, kicks off his shoes, and cautiously follows the sound to the bathroom, where he sees Jackson leaning over the sink, clumps of black hair falling everywhere as he shaves away the trendy bangs he's been growing out for over a year.

When he spots Kris in the mirror, he jumps and switches off the clippers with a guilty, sheepish smile. He turns around, brushing the hair off his shoulders. "Hey. I hope it's okay I borrowed this?"

He looks surprisingly different, face opened up, eyes large.

"I guess so," Kris says. "Why… is this happening, though?"

Jackson shrugs. "It was getting too long. Kept stabbing me in the eyes. Now I remember why I always used to keep it shaved."

Kris has resolved to back off, but he presses the question, just a little. "Why now?" he asks carefully.

Jackson doesn't blink. "I needed a change," is all he says.

Kris sighs and shuffles closer to inspect his work. It's a chaotic, uneven

mess, but at least Jackson had the foresight to start with a bigger guard, so it's salvageable. "Amateur," he concludes. "Give me that."

Jackson snorts and hands over the clippers.

"Sit," Kris instructs, pointing at the toilet. Jackson smirks a little but refrains from making a short joke.

Kris starts to even out his hair while Jackson watches him in the mirror. He's been wearing his own hair short since he graduated and realized how cost effective it was to just buzz it at home, so now can do it on himself without looking. He's steady and efficient as he goes back over Jackson's work.

As time passes, Jackson lets the pressure slowly push his head too far forward, so Kris has to pull him upright by the shoulder, and holds him in place as he follows the curve of his hairline around his ears. Jackson's body feels tense and brittle under his t-shirt.

Kris studies the nape of his neck. There aren't any new hickeys there—not that he's been cataloguing them, but he can't help wondering whether things have cooled down with Jeremy. If that's what this is all about.

He thumbs the guard off and shapes up the back with the bare razor, just for the hell of it, biting his lip in concentration.

"Like what you see?" Jackson teases.

Kris startles, then scoffs and shoves Jackson's head back down. Big mistake. He grunts, it sounds undeniably sexual, and Kris snatches his hand away like it was burned. Their eyes meet in the mirror, and the tension in the room thickens unbearably.

Kris switches off the clippers. "There," he says, pretending to be immune. "The Permadi special." It's basically done anyway.

Jackson runs his hand over his scalp to feel the bristles. "Thanks," he says, checking himself out. "How do I look?"

It's the same haircut Jackson had when they first met, but it sits on him differently now.

He used to be built and baby-faced and glowing, but over the years he's lost weight—both fat and muscle—and now he's pale and pinched, face lined with stress, shadows under his eyes like bruises.

It's obvious he's been struggling lately, but it's really hitting Kris how much of a toll things have taken.

Kris claps him bracingly on the shoulders. "You look great."

He needs to get his mind off this.

The next day at work, he goes on Grindr and asks out a guy he's had on the backburner for a while. They catch happy hour together at Kris's favorite dive and have a couple drinks. Kris has been thinking of him as Banana Emoji, but his real name is Parker, which is almost as bad. He's kind of dumb and cheesy, but he's got good abs, doesn't seem like a murderer, and is down to fuck, so everything is going great.

Kris drives them home in giddy pre-hookup tension. The guy hovers near him in the hall as he unlocks the door, caressing his waist and playing with his belt loops. He needs this. He really needs to unwind.

Unfortunately: when the door opens, it reveals Jackson is sprawled on the couch, staring dully at his phone. He glances up neutrally at Kris, but when he sees Parker, his face darkens thunderously. Shit.

He was supposed to be at work, but—well, it doesn't really matter what happened, here they all are now.

"Uhh," says Kris. He feels like he's been caught doing something wrong, which he absolutely has not. "Hey. Jackson."

He swallows an apology, which he owes no one, and latches the door behind him.

"That's my roommate," he tells Parker. "Jackson, this is my date." Said sternly, like to a dog prone to barking at guests.

Parker is either oblivious to the tension, or he picks the most bizarre way to try to deflate it. "I didn't know it was going to be a threesome," he jokes.

Kris feels his soul wither to a husk. "Ha," he laughs weakly. "No."

Jackson cocks his head. "Could be," he says, absolutely deadpan.

Parker's eyes light up, the idiot. He turns to look at Kris like it's Christmas.

“He’s kidding,” Kris explains gently.

“No I’m not,” says Jackson, with a sudden, distressing conviction in his voice. “You want it to be? I’m not busy.”

Parker laughs incredulously. “You’d be down?”

Jackson tosses his phone aside. He slides off the couch till he’s kneeling on the living room floor, and he gives Parker Banana Emoji a come-hither smile.

“How ‘bout it, bro?”

What the actual, literal fuck.

Jackson shuffles forward on his knees and takes Kris’s date by the belt, tugging him closer. Looks up at him through his lashes. “Ever been spitroasted?”

And he strains upward, hauling Parker down by the collar to kiss him.

Is this what people experience when they see war? Probably not. But Kris does feel like he’s going to have flashbacks for the rest of his life.

He peels them off each other, breaking things up. “No,” he tells Jackson, like a bad dog. Jackson scowls up at him like he can’t believe his genius plan was foiled, then stands up so fast he almost headbutts Parker in the face and stomps off to his room.

“Damn,” says Parker. Like he almost made it.

Kris makes coffee for the both of them in the morning, even though their home life is spinning wildly out of control. That doesn’t change the fact that they need coffee.

Jackson slurps his drink loudly, watching Kris pretend to look at his phone. Of course he doesn’t miss it when Jackson leans forward and puts his chin in his hands.

He braces himself.

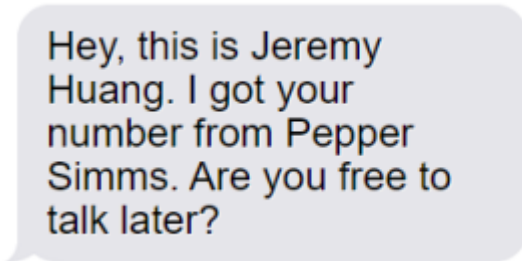
“So, you gonna see that guy again?” asks Jackson, all innocent. Yeah, he wasn’t really expecting an apology.

Kris has blocked that guy with extreme prejudice.

“I told him I’m dead,” he says bluntly.

Jackson cackles. A sick, whipped part of Kris feels warm and proud for making him laugh. It’s absurd, but he relaxes a little.

He starts to actually process what’s on the screen again when he gets a text from an unknown number. When he reads it, he can barely keep his mouth from falling open.



It’s like, at this point, why the fuck not.

They meet at a Starbucks on Kris’s lunch break, and Jeremy pays for his coffee.

Visually, he’s the most put-together, what, twenty-two-year-old? Kris has ever seen, but the nervous energy is rolling off of him in palpable waves. He’s for sure one of those uptight rich kids. Nice, gracious, but chronically incapable of chilling the fuck out. Right now he’s trying to make small talk, and it’s agonizing.

“So how long have you guys lived together?” Jeremy stirs his coffee an appropriate number of times, then folds his hands on the table. He has a nice manicure; it’s unreal.

Kris shrugs. “Couple years.” He still doesn’t know what the fuck they’re doing here.

Jeremy nods thoughtfully, like a newscaster conducting a live interview. “What’s he like as a roommate?”

He crosses his arms. “Good cook,” he says. “Kind of a neat freak.” He refuses to shittalk Jackson in front of this guy, if that’s what he’s looking for.

Jeremy raises his eyebrows, so surprised it's insulting. Either he doesn't respect Jackson at all, or Jackson is really not putting his best foot forward here. Both are equally believable.

"Okay," Kris sighs. "I have forty minutes before I have to be back at work. What's going on?"

Jeremy clenches his jaw so hard Kris can practically hear it creak, then blurts, "He's blackmailing me."

Kris hesitates. If he'd had to guess, he was expecting to confirm that Jackson really is Like That, or provide advice on breaking things off without triggering some insane tantrum, but this… this is heavier.

"How so?" he says cautiously.

Jeremy licks his lips. "Okay. Well, I'm…" He lowers his voice. "I'm gay," he says furtively.

"Wow," Kris says.

Jeremy swallows. He looks so stressed out that Kris relents. "It's fine, dude, me too."

He's shocked for a split second, then nods and relaxes a little.

Kris is putting two and two together, and he doesn't like the picture he's getting. "Are you saying Jackson threatened to out you?"

Jeremy nods miserably. "My parents would freak out."

"Sure," says Kris. "Not to mention your girlfriend."

Jeremy flinches. "I, uh. Do you guys talk about me?" he asks, apparently just now realizing that was a possibility.

Kris sighs and rubs his eyes, exhausted. "Not really…."

He laughs bleakly. "You must think I'm such a piece of shit."

Not as much as Jackson, apparently. Kris doesn't say it out loud, since he made a promise to himself, but he's sure thinking it.

Jeremy takes a deep breath. "Anyway. Do you think he'd really do it?"

Kris considers. How to put this tactfully. "Well... he wouldn't do it to *me* ."

Not that anyone has that over him. He's been out to his parents since he was fifteen, and it's all good by this point. Mostly. When his mom texts him about her Indonesian friends' nice daughters in the area, she doesn't *really* mean it.

Jeremy smiles ruefully. "You mean, he wouldn't do it to someone he actually likes."

Kris shrugs. If the shoe fits.

Jeremy laughs suddenly, covering his mouth. "I don't know what to do," he says. Now he actually sounds like he's on the verge of a breakdown. He looks his age, practically a kid, vulnerable and uncertain, alone in a foreign country with a secret that feels world-endingly dangerous.

Kris knows exactly what he should do, but knows he won't want to hear it:

Break up with your girlfriend. Get a personality. Find people who like you for real.

Don't entertain Jackson's self-destructive bullshit. Do as I say, not as I do.

"Listen," says Kris awkwardly. "Is there anyone..." He almost says, Is there anyone in your family. But he remembers telling his brother, his brother snitching to their dad, the screaming match that followed. Just because things worked out after years of attrition and passive aggression, that doesn't retroactively make what happened any less shitty. If he doesn't want to tell them, he's probably right. "Is there anyone you can talk to about this? In general?"

Jeremy looks down at his drink. Kris feels a painful twinge of sympathy. All the money in the world can't fix that kind of isolation. No amount of forty-dollar muscle tees can protect you.

Jeremy looks back up and gives him a small, self-deprecating smile. "I'm talking about it with you, right?"

Kris is starting to feel like a dad. And not in a sexy way.

All the way home, he debates with himself what to say to Jackson. He knew this shit with Jeremy was unhealthy, but whatever's between

them has gotten dark and poisonous.

He lingers over the mail in the hall—a package from his mom, a couple predatory credit card offers, bills, the Red Cross hounding him for more of his precious O+ blood, the usual, but he hasn't reached a conclusion by the time he walks in the door.

Another surprise is waiting for him: there's a girl sitting on their couch, drinking from one of their mugs, and Jackson is sitting beside her, watching her face intently. He's never seen Jackson sit so still or make such steady eye contact. He's usually hunched over, bouncing his leg, darting his eyes around as he talks.

She seems… really young. If being rejected by Kris means his committing to the gay panic and trying to get with, like, a teenager, then Kris seriously will have to yell at him. Jackson looks awkward when he sees Kris, nothing like the smug bitch he'd been this morning. "Uhh. Sorry," he says. He turns to the girl. "Do you want to continue this in my room?"

"No need," says Kris. He nods in greeting to the stranger, then flees to his own room in a stressful mirror image of the previous night. The walls are thin as ever, and the conversation's impossible to ignore even if he wanted to.

“You don’t look so good,” the girl is saying. “Are you getting enough to eat?”

“Come on, quit it. I get that enough from Mom.”

His sister, then, realizes Kris with relief, which is replaced immediately by new anger. He's known Jackson for years and for all he knew he was an only child.

He hides in there for their whole conversation, only making out bits and pieces. What he does know is that Jackson's voice sounds completely different with her, level and supportive.

It's fascinating, and a little unsettling. But sweet, Kris supposes.

After the sister leaves and the coast is clear, Kris unpacks his mom's package on the kitchen counter. Emping, rempeyek, *teh botol.* He can sense Jackson lurking behind him, but he just waits.

Jackson stabs a straw into one of the *teh botol* , takes a sip, and pulls a face.

"Dude, why does your mom hate you?"

"You don't have to drink it," Kris recites, reaching for the box, and Jackson leans away to take another sip and pull another face.

"No, I do."

This is a tradition of theirs, along with playing Smash, riling each other up sexually, and never telling each other anything about their lives. Apparently.

"I didn't know you had a sister," Kris says, and Jackson stills.

He lets his words hang heavy in the air. It usually doesn't take long for Jackson to crack like that, but today he stays quiet.

"How long have we been friends?" Kris hates the way his voice sounds. Accusing. He's not the manipulator.

Jackson's glance slides away. He drinks more tea, sullenly.

Kris's heart aches. "Seriously. Jackson. What's going on with you."

Jackson presses his lips together, looking wretched. He leans back on the counter, studying the ceiling.

"I don't know." Today it doesn't sound like a shutdown. It sounds like he's gathering his thoughts. Kris keeps unpacking the food and putting it away in the cupboards, afraid Jackson will spook if observed directly.

He takes a breath. “I have a brother, too. Older,” he says.

Kris nods slowly, not daring to interrupt.

“He’s kinda, like, troubled? It got bad all of a sudden when he was in high school. I still don’t know the details of what went down, but the school recommended a doctor. They prescribed him something, but my mom didn’t want a son on crazy pills, so she threw it away and he never had the chance to get right. They fought all the time, every day at dinner. It was like clockwork. Dad worked till late so there wasn’t much he could do to intervene.”

He pauses, clearly surprised with himself. Before he can get embarrassed or clam up, Kris puts a light hand on Jackson’s back and steers him to sit on the couch.

He rubs his fresh-cropped hair distractedly, the words spilling out now. “Like, I don’t blame him for leaving. He used to only hang out in the house when she wasn’t around. He’d make me keep watch for her car so he could lock himself in his room or slip out the back.”

Kris rubs his back in small, encouraging circles. Jackson takes a breath.

“Yeah. The whole thing stressed me out pretty bad. My grades started slipping and the school got worried. My parents freaked out when they suggested therapy. They said I was just doing it to hurt them. They said I had more opportunities at my age than they ever did, and I had nothing to be sad about. They couldn’t have, you know, two fuckups in the family.”

Kris nods attentively every time he pauses.

“So now David’s living on his own, he can’t hold down a job, he disappears for days at a time, he scares everyone constantly. But I think he’d rather live in his car than move back in. Maybe he does, I don’t really know.” Jackon’s voice catches.

“That’s heavy,” Kris says quietly.

Jackson just nods. “My mom’s obsessed about it. When I started school I was supposed to commute from home—it would’ve been cheaper, but home sucked so bad I just couldn’t do it. So I left, and now Bethany has to deal with everything. I think the youngest is supposed to have that stuff easier, but she has to text whenever she’s traveling anywhere, leaving and arriving. That kind of thing.” He takes a deep,

ragged breath. " *And* I'm broke."

He looks pale and small. Kris reaches for his hand, and Jackson lets him take it, even squeezes back a little.

"I just kind of feel like a waste of resources," he mumbles, looking at the floor. "I'm on their healthcare so I'm afraid if I try to deal with… you know, with whatever's wrong with me, they'll see it on the bill and freak. The surgery was already an expensive disaster, I just. I really, really, really can't fuck up any more."

They sit in sober silence for a while, holding hands.

Kris clears his throat.

"You…" He tries not to say it, but he's still too hurt to help it. "You know you could've talked to me about this earlier."

"I didn't want to, um…" Jackson scratches his head and doesn't finish the sentence. "I didn't want to," he says simply.

"What?"

"I didn't want you to lose respect for me," he says, looking anywhere but Kris's face.

Kris shoves him, half playfully, half from a genuine urge to beat him up. "Then you really are crazy," he says.

It's a gamble, but the joke lands, and a slow smile spreads across Jackson's tired face.

"Thanks," he says softly.

Kris clears his throat. He gestures at the couch around them, the spot where they had their little transgression. "We also have to talk about…"

Jackson sighs explosively and flings himself back on the cushions. "I know," he pouts. "Go ahead." He spreads his arms, martyrlike, and Kris can't help but laugh.

He takes a deep breath and delivers the speech he half composed on the way over. "Listen. We're adults, and we live together."

Jackson smiles crookedly. "Well what else do adults who live together __"

“Shut up.”

“Okay.”

“I really like you, Jackson. We can’t play games like that. It’s not good for me and it’s definitely not good for you.”

Jackson is flushed, glancing at Kris’s mouth for an instant before looking away. “Does that mean you didn’t like it?”

Kris sighs. “No, I.. didn’t say that.”

Jackson smiles disingenuously. “Then what’s the problem?”

Kris huffs. “Well, sorry if I feel like a—last resort or something.”

He looks surprised. “It’s not like that,” he insists. “I actually respect you.”

“Dude…” Kris says with a pained smile.

“I know,” groans Jackson. “That’s fucked.”

Kris rubs Jackson’s arm. He came here to chew him out, but instead he says, “I’m proud of you. You’ve worked really hard. I know you don’t think you are, but… you’re a very kind person.”

Jackson’s eyes get suspiciously shiny before Kris has mercy and leans over to give him the tightest hug he knows how to give. Jackson grips his shirt, face buried in his shoulder, and Kris gives him all the time he needs to compose himself.

When they finally pull apart, it isn’t very far. Kris can feel Jackson’s breath on his face, can see his chapped, worried-at lips and his thick eyelashes.

“One for the road?” Jackson whispers, and Kris’s stomach leaps.

“You’re like a monster,” he breathes. He leans in to press a slow, chaste kiss to Jackson’s mouth. When Jackson tries to push back, Kris holds him in place. “Be good,” he says sternly. Jackson reddens, which is highly satisfying.

“You’re a great kisser,” Kris tells him, still inches from his face. “But I think you have some stuff to think about.”

He doesn’t mention Jeremy. They both know what he means.

Jackson's still looking blotchy and miserable. "Do you want to play video games?" he says plaintively.

Kris takes a deep breath and pulls away. "It would be an honor."

Chapter 5: Help, My Ex-Girlfriend's Boyfriend Has Gone Nuclear

So Kris let him down gently, which was kind of worse than if he'd roasted him alive. He's made it clear he still wants to be friends, which is frankly more than Jackson deserves. But he's not really sure where that leaves them.

Until last week, they shared a lease, a Playstation, and the same taste in beer. Now it's, what? Two kisses? An excruciating conversation about all of Jackson's shortcomings over the past ten years? A threesome, almost? (That guy would have gone for it, for sure.)

Jackson is obviously used to rejection. And he understands that things are complicated between them. But the fact remains, Kris is casually hooking up with random dudes no hotter and *way* dumber than Jackson, who live *much* farther away, and that does sting.

He likes to think he could show Kris a good time. Maybe not as polished an act as those Grindr dudes, since he's only been doing it since January, but he's at least pretty good at sucking dick by now. Good enough to keep Jeremy Huang coming back for more.

Or he used to be, anyway.

He gets home from work after midnight and sits aggressively in his usual spot rather than go straight to his room. Kris gives him a nod of recognition, same as always. Of course he's being gracious about this. They sit on the couch together pretending everything is normal while Jackson stews alive in his own humiliation.

When he's finally able to force himself to relax, he lets his legs fall open and immediately feels his knee bounce against Kris's thigh. Fuck. Should he move away and draw attention to it, or just play it off?

Too slow. Kris's posture stiffens just a shade, and the atmosphere sours. Fuck.

Kris clears his throat and turns to face him. "Jackson," he says

seriously, “I hope I was clear enough before….”

Jackson has already teleported to the opposite side of the couch. “Yup! No, I got it,” he says brightly. “It’s my complete bad.”

Kris takes a breath like he’s about to say something, but then he just shakes his head and turns back to his game.

Jackson knows Kris pretty well, can read him better than most, but the guy can close himself like a book when he wants to. It’s so unfair. He might as well have hallucinated the hungry look in his eyes when they kissed.

Case in point, Jackson realizes he’s been staring at Kris for several seconds too long, and Kris can definitely tell, but his face betrays nothing.

Jackson digs his phone out of his pocket for an excuse to look away.

But he definitely kissed back. Didn’t he?

Jackson has known for years, on some level, that Kris was attracted to him. It was always a subtle ego boost, a perk to hanging out. He remembers showing off, back when he had the energy and the muscle tone, stretching his arms over his head and enjoying the way Kris’s eyes would follow him. He remembers idly wondering, more than once, if Kris had ever thought about him while jerking off.

He has to clench his jaw not to groan aloud. Looking back, it wasn’t even subtle. Did Kris suspect Jackson was… into guys, before Jackson did?

Shannon sure did. It’s exactly what she accused him of, days before dumping him. Sexually confused, messing around with his roommate, shitting where he eats. God, she was right to cut him loose.

Too bad she can’t see the red flags on her new guy, though.

Speaking of which. He thumbs to his texts from Jeremy Huang, who has been radio silent ever since they fucked. Their last exchange haunts him, just Jackson inviting himself into Jeremy’s bed:

Jackson: u up?

Jackson: i'm coming over

And then he got left on read. For over a week.

He gives it another good six minutes to make it clear to Kris that he's not uncomfortable, then mumbles goodnight and goes to his room. He flops onto his bed and composes several texts to Jeremy, each more desperate and tryhard than the last:

Jackson: hey.

Jackson: sup

Jackson: fuck you

Jackson: maybe next time i'll fuck you

Jackson: how many times have you done this

Jackson: saw you at that party

Jackson: so how's your girlfriend?

Jackson: buy me a laptop or i'll ruin your life

He deletes all of them.

He doesn't snap until the next time they have a class together.

He tries to catch Jeremy's eye when he comes in the room, but is completely ignored. The smug prick even decides to squeeze by Jackson's desk on his way to the other side of the room.

Jackson spends the entire class staring at him, to the exclusion of the actual math. To the point that a couple kids from study group are noticing, and looking between them curiously. Jeremy doesn't glance his way once.

In the end, he just wants a reaction. It's that or grind his teeth down to the nerve. So when class wraps up Jackson admits defeat and texts first.

Jackson: you suck at math

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Jeremy reach into his pocket and

glance at his phone, then go unnaturally still. After a moment, he starts typing—hesitates—then all at once he hits send, shoves the phone into his backpack, zips it up, and walks out.

Jeremy: You suck at sucking dick

What did he expect, an apology?

After blacking out with rage for a minute, Jackson does his best to slam every door between the classroom and his afternoon shift.

It's better this way anyhow. No fawning over him or smoothing out his fee-fees, no asking if he's "okay." This isn't a relationship. They both know Jeremy doesn't care, so why pretend otherwise? It's beneath both of them. They certainly don't have to acknowledge Jackson behaving like a scared virgin getting his cherry popped, or sneaking away and sulking about it afterwards.

Doesn't matter. Jackson needs to focus on surviving midterms, his family is lowkey falling apart again, and he has to stop blowing off work if he wants to eat. Chasing after Asian Patrick Bateman is going to be, at best, a waste of his time.

On the other hand: he has to take the edge off somehow. Kris won't do it, and Jackson just doesn't have the free time to trick some new idiot into fucking him.

So keeps his distance—physically—but when he feels himself getting antsy, he pulls out his phone. He finds a good selfie from the other day when he woke up too early and couldn't get back to sleep. He shoots it to Jeremy, then turns the phone upside down and tries to focus on studying, buzzing with suppressed energy, bouncing his leg. When he gets a text back, he makes himself finish the section he was on before he allows himself to look.

All it says is:

Jeremy: Scrawny

Jackson scowls, tries to turn it around.

Jackson: does it make you want to push me around, you big strong man you?

Two replies this time. He finishes his thought before checking.

Jeremy: You don't have to do anything special

Jeremy: Your face always makes me want to push you

He snorts. Well, he walked into that one.

Jackson: haha then what

This response comes almost immediately.

Jeremy: You're a slut

Jackson's stomach leaps. He can't tell what emotion is making that happen, but if he was a betting man he'd guess anger and lust, in that order. He tries to think of a retort.

Jackson: lmao spicy

Jeremy: You are

Jeremy: I bet you liked showing off all those hickeys I gave you

This is the sextiest response he's gotten so far, but now he's too pissed off to go along with it.

Jackson: yeah I posted them on Facebook and tagged your parents

Jeremy starts typing, deletes it, and starts again.

Jeremy: You know, I thought you'd finally shut up after I fucked you

Jackson pushes his breath out slowly through his teeth.

Okay.

Anyway.

Two weeks ago, Jeremy would never have texted something that screenshottable from his own number. Jackson would point it out, but he kind of wants to see if he can get him to say more.

Jackson: yeah? did it work?

Jeremy: No

Jeremy: I should've known nothing would.

Jeremy: You moaned and whined like a little bitch, it was even more annoying.

Jackson tries to remember how Jeremy sounded when they fucked. He mainly remembers how confident he was, how cold. Barely a sound except for when he came, gasping in his ear. The thought of it somehow still makes his dick twitch, but what else is new.

It doesn't matter. He's soured on this conversation.

Jackson: aw babe

Jackson: i will never shut up and that's a threat

He puts his phone on Do Not Disturb and (gently, underhanded) throws it across the room.

When he drags himself home from class the next day, Kris is making them both French toast.

"Sweet," Jackson says, slinging his backpack onto the floor.

Kris acknowledges him with a wave of his spatula as he fans the air below their trick smoke detector. Somewhere inside, a chime starts to go off. "Can you grab that?" he asks.

Jackson follows the gesture to the arm of the couch and silences the alarm on Kris's phone. When he casually, non-invasively glances at the notifications, he feels his blood run cold and his body go into fight or flight mode.

He stands on the kitchen threshold. "Kris."

Kris moves his pan off the burner and turns to face him, toweling his hands off briskly. "Yeah?"

"Why do you have a Venmo payment from Jeremy Huang?"

Kris frowns, takes his phone, and checks the notification.

Jackson waits five seconds before he snaps."Well?"

Kris pockets the phone. "I bought him a coffee," he says coolly. "He

paid me back."

Nowhere near good enough. "*Why*?"

Kris has the gall to look exasperated. "I don't know, man, I think he's lonely."

"*Lonely*? Fuck lonely, he's a monster!" Jackson knows he sounds hysterical, but he can't help it.

Kris barely blinks, but he takes way too long to respond. "He's just a person," he says finally.

"What did he say to you?" Jackson demands.

Kris raises his eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"Was he trying to get something on me?"

Kris almost looks disappointed. "No," he just says finally.

Jackson throws up his hands. "Great, he got to you too. I thought you were on my side."

Now the look on Kris's face is dangerously close to pity. Jackson has seen that from everyone else in his life—except, he supposes, Jeremy—and he's fucking sick of it.

"Whatever," he snarls, injecting venom into it to compensate for how lame a response it is. "I'm going to work."

He leaves hungry, slamming the door on the way out.

He doesn't go to work, obviously. He goes to Jeremy's place to stir shit up.

He calls out sick from the bus towards campus, which is dicey at this point, but Mark or Suzanne will always pick up another shift so fuck it, right? If he does get fired he'll have to drop out of school and he can finally just fake his death and start over. Either way, better make this worth it.

Thursday is Jeremy and Shannon's stay-in date night, which is pathetic, but it's more pathetic that he knows that. Social media really was a mistake.

By the time he gets there his outrage has simmered to a low roil. He's come up with a half-dozen elegant, cutting things to say about going behind people's backs. Ideally they'll both make Shannon feel shitty, and Jeremy feel shitty *and* threatened.

When he gets there he pounds on the door like it's a drug bust, and Jeremy Huang answers the door looking like a goddamn GQ model.

His hair is parted neatly, and he's wearing an expensive silk button-up, a departure from the expensive t-shirts he usually favors. Behind him, Shannon is reclined on the couch in a tight blue dress—tailored, not slutty. She's even wearing lipstick. She never did this when she and Jackson were together.

The two of them look so good it's obnoxious. Seriously, who dresses like this in their own home?

"Hey you guys," says Jackson brightly. "Jeremy, I'm glad you're home. I was just in the neighborhood and I had a question about The Homework?"

Jeremy scowls and leans in, getting right in his face. "What are you doing," he demands in a low voice, his weird international accent coming through strong in his agitation. He is fully wearing cologne right now.

Jackson doesn't budge an inch. He smiles serenely. "Cockblocking," he says. "What the fuck does it look like."

"Jackson? What are you doing here?" Shannon echoes, standing up.

"The Homework," he repeats cheerfully, squeezing chest to chest past Jeremy and into the apartment.

"Bullshit," she snaps. "Take it to a shared doc. This is weird."

He clasps his hands. She's given him the perfect setup. " *Is* it weird?" he wonders, glancing over at Jeremy. "Kind of invasive? Kinda sneaky?"

She narrows her eyes. "What's going on?"

"Your boyfriend's got a problem with me," he says. It's certainly not a lie. He looks at Jeremy's furious face, like: dance, worm. Remember who's in charge.

Shannon turns to Jeremy expectantly. She doesn't ask, she just waits.

Jeremy looks like he's on the verge of… something. Then something else entirely seems to wash over his body. His perfect posture abandons him. His face relaxes and his shoulders unclench.

He turns to Shannon and looks her right in the eye.

"Jackson and I are fucking," he says, voice so calm it's eerie.

Shannon freezes with a baffled half-smile on her face like she's waiting for the punchline. It fades, slowly, the longer Jeremy doesn't blink.

"Since New Years," he continues into the silence. "After you left the

party. I sucked his dick on the couch, right over there." He points.

Shannon's eyes follow the gesture, then move to Jackson, who probably looks just the way he feels: like he's been taunting someone with a live grenade, only to have them reach over and pull the pin.

"What..." she says, or tries to, but her voice fails and fizzles out.

Jeremy continues, "After that we hooked up on campus. And he comes over every time you go out of town." An unhinged smile, of all things, spreads across his face. He looks out of control in a way Jackson's never seen him, even at his angriest.

Shannon tries again. "I mean what… the *fuck*— " she begins, the heat rushing back to her voice.

And that's when the doorbell rings.

Jeremy raises his eyebrows at them both. "Early," he comments. He goes to answer the door again.

To Jackson's horror, he recognizes the man standing outside.

"Come inside, Dad," says Jeremy, flinging the door open. "Shannon's here already."

Jeremy's dad really does look like a handsome older clone of his son. It's very strange to watch him smile all warmly, in a suit.

"Miss Shannon, it's such a pleasure! I'm Zheng Guo. I was beginning to think Jun Hao was lying about you," he says, with the awkward chuckle of a dad who doesn't normally laugh much.

Shannon takes the hand he offers. "It's so good to finally meet you," she says smoothly. Jackson's seen her be fake before—mostly to RAs, sometimes to sorority chicks if they stepped to her, but this is on another level.

That's when Mr. Huang spots Jackson, lurking in the foyer looking like he just climbed down out of the tree he slept in, wearing sweatpants and a week's worth of stubble.

"Oh, is that Jackson?" he says, apparently delighted. At least someone is. "How nice to see you again."

"Hi," Jackson croaks.

Shannon stares at them. “You’ve met before?”

Jackson’s stomach lurches unpleasantly as he watches her put the pieces together. He looks away.

“Uh. Yeah,” he says. “I was just… the… homework.” He accidentally glances back at her in time to see her eyes widen dangerously.

He’s still wearing his shoes, the sneakers Jeremy paid for. All the better for a speedy escape. He moves toward the door. “Anyway!”

“Why don’t you join us for dinner?” suggests Mr. Huang. “The more the merrier.”

“Oh!” Jackson raises his palms like the man’s just pointed a gun at him. “No no no. No. I couldn’t, uh, possibly.”

“Now, I’m not just being polite,” Mr. Huang says graciously. “I may be old, but I still remember my student days. You can always use a nice meal—I insist.”

If he thought Jeremy was going to intervene, well, he’s been dangerously misreading the man.

“Yeah, Jackson,” Jeremy tells him with an uncanny blink. “He insists.”

“That’s… very kind,” Jackson says. He can’t help throwing another bewildered glance at Shannon, who looks incredulous in her fancy dress, and oh god, of course this is why they’ve dressed up, he’s such a fucking idiot.

He clears his throat and tries again. “Unfortunately, I—”

“Jackson,” says Shannon. He shuts up immediately, and she fixes him with a shockingly convincing smile. “Come on. Don’t be rude.”

“Oh,” he says. Some kind of residual obedience from two years of dating kicks in, and he hears himself say: “Okay.”

He first saw her at track practice, perched alone in the bleachers, half doing her homework, half watching the runners. He caught her looking at him once or twice, but she never looked away or acted embarrassed. She had the wherewithal to use a clipboard to keep her papers from blowing away, but the vanity to leave her miles of hair down. It kept flying into her eyes, and she kept having to tuck it

behind her ear. Which *was* pretty adorable, so maybe she did know what she was doing.

After two more practices of noticing each other from afar, she badgered her friend into introducing them. He admired that—he would've just kept crushing on her indefinitely.

She was bubbly and whip-smart, big eyes, big boobs, precise, assertive to the point of bossy. He couldn't believe his luck, really.

They were drunk on the lawn after midnight the first time she really talked about herself. She said back in school she was an awkward, obedient wallflower, and now she was trying to reinvent herself. Her mom made her wear the same kind of clothes for ten years, and her hair was always like two feet long. She hated it, but she was so boring she never thought fighting back was worth it.

Jackson wondered how someone so perceptive of others understood herself not at all. He said he couldn't imagine her ever being boring, and he meant it. She shoved him away, laughing, but then she paused thoughtfully, and scooted closer to give him a warm kiss that made his whole face tingle.

"Wanna cut my hair off?" she whispered loudly in his ear.

"Oooh, edgy," he laughed, but she stared at him without blinking. "Seriously? What if I mess it up?"

She kissed him again. Even beer breath was cute on her. "I trust you." She paused. "Besides, I can always get it fixed over the weekend."

She semi-snuck him up to her dorm, where she laid down a towel, took off her top, and gave him the scissors she kept in a purple cup on her desk. It was one of the most erotically charged moments of his young life.

Her hair was silky, mesmerizing to touch. His heart clenched when he made the first cut, but as he continued he became absorbed in the work, listening to the sound of the scissors and their breath.

When they were done, Shannon had a respectable bob that flew out like wings when she shook her head. It actually did look a little edgy. It emphasized her pale shoulders and her delicate collarbone, but her face looked sharper, her eyes brighter.

"You're so hot," Jackson said fervently. She laughed and scrunched up

her face, and Jackson's heart turned into lava.

There are four of them, so they take one car to the restaurant, Mr. Huang's rental.

"I call shotgun," says Jeremy cheerfully, and slides into the seat next to his dad, slamming the door loudly.

His dad mumbles a question and he answers in English, "Shotgun, yeah. Americans say it. No, I know. It has nothing to do with guns."

Shannon and Jackson sit side by side in the backseat, not making eye contact. Her skirt is riding up and she has goosebumps on her knees. He wants to offer her his jacket, but she'd probably rip his arms off, and she'd probably be right to.

They make it to the restaurant in an excruciating twenty-two minutes. It's the nicest place Jackson has been since before college: vast, high-ceilinged, aggressively upholstered. He's seated across from Shannon, with a Huang to each side. Why not. He feels underdressed and ghoulish, shiftily studying everyone's face in the golden lighting. Jeremy is still acting disturbingly casual considering what he's just revealed, and Shannon looks like she's still in shock.

They order, which is to say Mr. Huang orders for everyone, and Jeremy just asks for beer. As soon as the server leaves, Shannon is on her feet with her purse hanging from her shoulder. "Excuse me," she murmurs, and her heels clack with purpose as she strides around the corner towards the bathroom.

Meanwhile, Jeremy is still wearing that unnervingly calm, half-smirking face, but he also looks queasy and pale. Jackson watches him take the cap off the bottle and notices his hands are trembling.

Jackson sips his tea warily and watches the Huangs like a tennis match as they switch to Mandarin and make small talk.

"She's beautiful."

"Yeah."

"How did you ever convince her to date you?"

Jeremy smiles good-naturedly. "I don't know." He doesn't elaborate.

Mr. Huang gives him a once over. “That’s an interesting suit you’re wearing, Jun Hao.”

He takes a long sip of his beer, looking his dad right in the eyes. “Thanks.”

“Where do you get most of your clothes in America?”

“Just this one mall downtown.”

“Wow. An indoor mall?”

“Partly.”

“Partly, ah. And what do you do for fun?”

Jeremy catches Jackson’s eye and suddenly laughs. Jackson’s heart drops.

“What’s funny?” his dad demands, frustrated.

Jeremy smiles at him sidelong for a long, terrifying moment before he finally looks away. “Nothing, I just remembered a joke.” He finishes his beer and signals for another.

Shannon has been gone so long that Jackson starts to wonder if she just walked out and took an Uber home. Shit, he should have thought of that first.

Shannon makes it back to the table just as the food comes out. Her eyes are red and swollen, but her face is a stone mask of calm. Her makeup is perfect.

Guilt stabs Jackson’s stomach like a sudden cramp. He has to look away as Mr. Huang greets her enthusiastically.

Jeremy ignores them all, well into his second beer already. It’s like he’s trying to get wasted.

"Tell me about yourself,” Mr. Huang encourages, as he spins the lazy Susan to offer her the first serving of roast duck. “What are your interests?”

Shannon’s posture is perfect. “Um. I like to travel,” she says.

“That’s wonderful! Where have you been?”

She licks her lips. “I... actually just went to Canada for the first time.”

Jeremy gives Jackson the side-eye. “I remember that,” he says. “Jackson, didn’t we spend time together while she was away?”

She stops short, looking like she’s been slapped, but luckily Mr. Huang now wants to tell her all about a restaurant in Toronto he went to in the 80s.

Jackson slowly pulls out his phone and texts her under the table.

Jackson: truce

Jackson: please

Jackson: his dad can’t find out

She has to know. Jeremy can’t come out, it would ruin his life. He’s paid dearly to keep this secret. She has to know it’s important.

Otherwise, he’s just handed her the perfect tool for vengeance.

Her eyes flick down when the message goes through, but she doesn’t read it—she’s busy nodding and smiling at Mr. Huang, who is simply too obsessed with her to notice any of this. He keeps complimenting her and telling her how much better she is than Jeremy, which normally Jackson would find hilarious, but now the timing is all wrong.

He clears his throat. “Uhh, Mr. Huang, I don’t think I’ve never had this before.” He points at the token vegetable dish, feeling that’s the best bet. “Is it regional?”

Mr. Huang takes the bait and starts enthusiastically explaining the mushrooms to him. Jackson looks past him to Shannon, who checks her phone, then meets his eyes. Jaw tight, she gives him a small nod.

Jeremy, meanwhile, is barely even pretending to listen. He leans back in his chair, drinking steadily and joylessly. When he drains his glass and moves to top it off, Shannon grabs the bottle out of his reach. She pours him a conservative dollop, and when he frowns, she stares him down with a look that Jackson remembers very well: *Fucking try me.*

Jeremy just rolls his eyes.

Mr. Huang wraps up the mushroom thing and zeroes back in on Shannon. “Have you decided on a major yet?”

She takes a breath and throws herself on the grenade. “You know,” she says, “I haven’t yet.” Jackson watches in admiration as she steels herself and meets Mr. Huang’s eyes, standing strong against the immediate torrent of unsolicited advice. Employability, second and third languages, STEM. He hasn’t heard it from this particular parent but he could probably recite it by heart. It’s brutal to watch, but she doesn’t even twitch.

While she’s distracted, Jeremy reaches for the bottle again. Jackson lunges across his plate and all but wrestles it out of his hand. He pours for him, again extravagantly giving him about a thimbleful. Jeremy glares at him, and Jackson tries to give him the finger with his eyes. Chill the fuck out, he also tries to communicate.

“Well Jun Hao, I see you *have* done well for yourself,” his father says knowingly. Jackson almost fumbles the bottle. What is he talking about? There’s no way.

“It’s like you have two wives pouring for you,” he chuckles.

Everyone freezes with a different dreadful smile fixed on their face.

Mr. Huang lacks context, but he has the common sense to see he’s misstepped. He clears his throat, reddening. “Uh, of course,” he backpedals, turning to Shannon, “obviously, you’re very young, you have your studies to complete before worrying about marriage.”

“Very enlightened, Dad,” Jeremy says sagely. He gives Shannon a respectful nod, half-swallowing a grin. “No pressure.”

There’s a strained pause.

“Anyway,” says Shannon. “I’m thinking about engineering.”

The mood may be agonizing, but Jackson isn’t going to waste a free meal. On top of everything else there are two whole-ass fish, one steamed and one braised. He’s only eaten like this before at like, weddings. He puts away as much food as he can, tamps it down with tea, and keeps going. He definitely has more than his share—Shannon eats robotically when she isn’t actively being polite. Jeremy keeps drinking, but at least he’s not getting a word in edgewise.

Between Shannon and Jackson, they convince Mr. Huang to take them straight home and not to a second location for dessert, thanking him profusely and insisting they need to study (which is definitely true and Jackson is definitely fucked), while Jeremy just stares blankly out the window.

He drops them off in the parking lot and the two of them strong-arm Jeremy inside, trying not to look like they're supporting his weight till his dad is out of sight. The first thing he does is bolt to the bathroom to be sick. They exchange glances—he's drunk, but not that drunk.

Shannon gets him water and helps him into bed, while Jackson hides his phone on top of a kitchen cabinet. It'll be a fun little treasure hunt later, and he won't be able text anything crazy till he's sobered up.

She's in the bedroom with him for a while. Jackson can hear low voices, but he can't make out any words. Are they talking? Fighting? Is she smothering him with a pillow? He weighs the pros and cons of just leaving now.

But eventually she comes out in a ponytail and pair of Jeremy's sweats, feet bare, heels in hand. They stand there in the fancy living room and stare at each other.

Technically, Jackson is a free agent. He's not obligated to stay.

"Welp, good night." He gropes for the doorknob with his hand, finds it, twists it.

"Is that all you have to say?" Shannon demands. He grits his teeth, lets the door latch shut again, and turns to face her.

"I don't know, you cheated first?"

Ah.

He's thought it a lot, but never meant to say it, let alone blurt it out the instant the shit hit the fan. It's an incredible rush, though—he sees why Jeremy would want to do it. How inviting it might be to just put a relationship out of its misery.

Shannon throws her shoes on the ground. "Fuck you. That's not the same."

“What?” Jackson screeches.

She levels a manicured finger at him. “You never took us seriously!”

“Of course I did!” And he says another thing he never intended to: “You’re the one that ran away as soon as you found out I had real problems.”

She clutches her head. “Okay. Jackson? You would rather *die* than talk about your real problems. It’s all the other ones you never shut up about.”

“Excuse me?” His voice keeps climbing in pitch the more outraged he gets.

She stares him down. “You heard me. All you want to do is bitch about the unfairness of it all, because that’s easier than admitting how much you *hate yourself* !”

He’s shook, but he does his best to pull together a sneer. “I see. So it’s fine because I bored you.”

She doesn’t back off. “I did everything I could to help, but you never listened. I was just some spoiled coed with a charmed life, right? What would I know about struggle? *Fuck you.”* She advances on him, pointing, until she’s poking him in the chest. “You can’t ignore your partner except for whenever you feel like shitting on them. It’s not sustainable.”

Jackson opens his mouth, but she stands on her toes to really get in his face. She hisses, “If you keep acting like this, you’re gonna wind up thirty and alone and pretending you don’t know why.”

He waits, but this time she’s said her piece, dropping to the balls of her feet, crossing her arms sullenly.

Jackson’s voice comes out weird and choked, but he’s never been one to drop an argument. “So... why drag it out if you’d already given up on me?”

She throws him a dirty look. “You’re the one that gave up.”

“But you threw me a birthday party anyway,” he presses.

“I felt *sorry* for you!” she snaps, and she must’ve finally said every cruel thing she’s been sitting on, because she abruptly runs out of

steam and looks away.

Jackson is finally speechless, just for a second, and he hates himself for it.

“Well,” he says, strangled, vicious, “I hope you’ve learned from that mistake.”

She gestures around, at him, at Jeremy, at the apartment, at this whole year. “*Yeah.*”

Jackson shoves his hands in his pockets.

He feels sorry. He didn’t think he would, but of course he does. He can’t say so now, for one thing because he’s positive she’ll cry. So instead he says, quietly, “At least you know now. About him.”

Shannon scoffs. “What do I know? Are you guys like, in love?”

Jackson actually laughs. “Nah… you know, I might hate him more than anyone I know.”

A ghost of a smile flickers across her face. “That’s messed up.”

It’s beyond obvious, so he just shrugs. He looks over at Jeremy’s marble countertops as he tries to choose his words.

“Thanks for… you know.” He gestures vaguely. “Doing the decent thing.”

She narrows her eyes. “Well, yeah. I’m not a war criminal, Jackson.”

“Still, though. You could have destroyed him.”

She sighs. “Whatever. I’m furious with both of you.”

She sounds more tired than anything.

He steals a thing of whiskey from the liquor cabinet for the bus ride back. Shannon watches him do it and doesn’t try to stop him.

He’s trying to unlock the front door when it unlatches from the inside and Kris hauls it open, the maddest Jackson has ever seen him.

“Where were you?” he demands, punching Jackson viciously in the

arm.

“Ow! What the fuck, dude?” He sounds so whiny, it actually makes him want to punch himself.

“Your shift ended hours ago,” he hisses. “I went to the store to see if you needed a ride and they said you never showed.”

“Let me inside,” Jackson mumbles, but Kris stands his ground.

“You didn’t text back,” he insists. “This isn’t like you.”

Jackson shrugs. “I don’t know, I think it’s just like me. I think it’s fucking typical.”

“Spare me, okay?” Kris snaps. “Were you at Jeremy’s again? Do I need to stage an intervention?”

Jackson doesn’t burst into tears. But the bourbon hits him all at one, and it’s so unfair that all of a sudden his whole face clenches up and his breath will only come in gulps.

Kris sighs.

“Okay, man, come on in,” he says. He sounds annoyed, which only makes Jackson feel worse. “Yeah, get your key out of the door, come inside.” He guides Jackson by the elbow, who finally gets himself under control and shakes him off.

He has an exam in less than twenty-four hours, but fuck it. He kicks off his shoes, shuts himself in his room, and crawls fully clothed into bed, exhausted by every goddamn bit of it, not to mention all the food. At least his blood is rushing to his stomach right now. It’ll stay out of trouble there.

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